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When Midnight Comes



Edith Delatash

~ Romantic Times Library ~

She clung helplessly to his shoulders as the desire flowing through her became a white-hot river of lava.

He crushed her closer, willingly burning himself with its heat. Her world spun in blackening circles, and she sagged against him in need of his support.

"You poor darling," he muttered thickly, tearing his mouth from hers. "I could at least let you breathe."

"It would help," she agreed with a bewitched smile. She gazed at him, her love flowing in molten waves. A lock of hair had fallen over his forehead, and she brushed it tenderly, aching away from his flushed face. How she loved every wonderful part of him!

They moved as one to the bedroom. . .

She clung helplessly to his
shoulders as the massive flaring
through her became a white-hot
river of lava.

He watched her then, nothing but
himself with his hand the world from
in blazing circles, and the sword against him
in need of his support.

"For your safety," he murmured thickly
leaving the words from her. "I would as soon
let you die."

"It would help," she agreed with a faint smile.
She knew as time her face flared in
red-hot waves. A web of fire had fallen over her
forehead, and she reached it with aching
arms from his fluted face. Then she looked away
unseeing, out of head.

They moved on now to the highway.

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Edith Delatush

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CHAPTER ONE

"You never could work in the garden without decorating your face with a smudge."

The fragile head of the petunia Marcy was planting snapped off as she froze on hearing the deep voice behind her. David! He was back!

The incredible feeling of joy that surged through her was immediately stifled by the memory of six months of pain. Pulling in a controlled breath, she slowly sat back on her heels. It took a major effort to turn and look at him, but by that time she had her emotions under control.

"Hello, David," she said coolly. She'd forgotten the effect he had on her whenever she saw his broad shoulders and narrow hips. Had she really thought that she'd tucked it all safely away? "We haven't seen you for a while."

The warmth in his eyes immediately retreated under her cool greeting. "Six months," he admitted.

Six months and three days, she corrected silently with painful accuracy. "Is it that long?" she asked, as she forced her fingers to release their death grip on the

trowel she was holding. "Where did you go this time?" she questioned with feigned indifference.

"Bolivia." His answer was terse. His nearly black eyes bored into hers as if trying to read her mind while he absently rubbed his left arm.

Dark-eyed senioritas flashed through her mind as she carefully placed the trowel on the ground. "That sounds like fun," she said flippantly.

She felt him withdraw as he stared at her intently. "How is Martha?" he questioned.

"My mother? She's been having some of her better days." *But she could well go into a tailspin if she finds you're back. She loved you like a son,* she thought.

He stopped the rubbing and gave his arm a shake as if in annoyance. "Is the apartment empty?"

Marcy wanted to scream, *No! Get out of my life. . . . How dare you think you can walk back into it as calmly as you left it!*

"Yes," she heard herself say. "You're lucky. After several months went by and we didn't hear from you, I figured it would be wise to try to rent it to someone else. My mother, however, said we should wait. By the way, the apartment needs airing."

David regarded her gravely. "I can open windows. I know I owe you all the back rent."

You owe me oceans of tears and black nights filled with despair. "You can discuss that with my mother," she said with a dismissive shrug.

He nodded slowly. "I'll see her after I take up my suitcases."

He turned and only then did Marcy notice the tired

sag to his shoulders as he walked to where his car sat in the driveway. Did one get jet lag crossing the equator? she wondered.

A frown furrowed her brow as she realized what was bothering her. His teak-dark tan was gone, replaced with a startling paleness. Certainly Bolivia would be the perfect place to add to its richness. He must have been tied down to a desk job this time, she gloated with uncharacteristic bitterness.

He'd arrived in her life a year ago from a road-building job in Mexico to rent the apartment in their carriage house. Though she quickly discovered that his job was to iron out trouble spots for a large international construction company, she suspected from the way his suit couldn't hide the play of muscles that he did more than direct from a distance.

She'd found herself examining him with untoward attention. He'd never be labeled handsome—his features were slightly out of alignment. But when laughter glinted in his deep brown eyes and his teeth flashed whitely in a tilted, heart-demolishing smile . . . ! In spite of her twenty-eight years, none of the men Marcy had dated had prepared her for the explosive effect he'd had on her. He was dominatingly, threateningly male, and she'd had no defense against him.

For long moments after David left, Marcy stared blankly at the petunias she'd been planting. He'd lived in the apartment only two weeks before he went on his first disappearing act. He'd been gone three months then, to Kenya, and this time, six. How long would it be the next time—nine months?

She picked up the trowel and dug with forceful determination into the soft loam. The real question was, she admitted, how was she going to manage with David staying even one week!

Marcy worked doggedly, planting the remaining flowers in the flat. She'd always loved this time of the year when the earth was resurging into new life, and she couldn't wait to plant the annuals in anticipation of the riotous color that would bloom throughout the summer. But her contented mood had been shattered, permitting the remembered pain to resurface. Six months ago she'd spent a wild and glorious night in David's arms. The next day he was gone without a note or a call, and her bewilderment had gradually turned into a bitterness that had stained her days with acid streaks.

When finished, Marcy dropped the trowel and empty plant box by the back porch. She was usually methodical and would have returned them to the area reserved for garden tools in the car garage. But the snug apartment sat above it, and it now held David. She found it impossible to go to the end of the property where his car sat.

The setup was usual along the tree-shaded street. Most of the estate houses had been built at the turn of the century when Montclair was a pleasant afternoon drive into the New Jersey countryside from New York City and Jersey City. The affluent built their huge houses on sprawling lots. The garages frequently held horses as well as the then new autocars, and apartments were built above them for the groom or chauffeur.

The Brown house, luckily, was not as large as most. After her father's death the rent from the carriage house carried the taxes which had grown more formidable over the years so that Marcy and her mother could afford to remain. Martha had been brought there as a bride, and Marcy knew the pain her mother harbored over the thought of ever having to move.

Marcy stepped into the lavatory off the large, old-fashioned but comfortable kitchen and grimaced when she saw the streak of soil across her softly rounded cheek. David's greeting returned, and she avoided the sad look that came to her large gray eyes made remarkable by the thick fringe of dark lashes. He'd loved to tease her about how she always managed to smudge her face when working in the garden, and she recalled with painful clarity how lovingly she'd imagined his words to have been said. It had seemed to be part of his wooing. Well, he'd won and as soon as he'd won, he had removed himself from the scene of her capitulation.

She pulled at her T-shirt absently, unmindful of how the action gave prominence to her high firm breasts, or how the faded jeans were faithful to her nipped-in waist and long slender legs. She didn't have to be hit on the head to figure out David's reasoning. He was always on the move. There was no place in his life for any commitments. She had to give him credit. He'd been very careful to lay that out to her in the very beginning when they could no longer deny the attraction between them.

But she, foolish creature, thought she could handle

it that way. She had, too, until she'd let that one night trick her into building castles in the sky, castles that had collapsed with a resounding crash when she'd returned from a convention to find him gone. But then, castles in the sky had no solid foundation to keep them aloft. . . . What had she expected?

Once again she felt that pain, that terrible sense of abandonment and loss, and she attacked her wind-blown hair with a brush to banish her thoughts. Soon the long wheat-blond hair lay in its accustomed turning curl against her shoulders. Feathering the soft bang over her forehead, Marcy straightened her shoulders before going resolutely to the sunlit dining room that had been turned into her mother's bedroom.

Marcy dreaded telling her mother that David Swenson, her star boarder, had returned. Her lips twisted in a grimace, remembering her own confused reaction when first meeting David. Confounded by the intensity of her desire to touch, to fondle, to make love to this total stranger, she'd retreated, struggling to understand what had happened.

Later, under her mother's not-so-subtle probing, she admitted while feigning nonchalance that yes, their new boarder was an interesting person but . . . so what? Her social calendar was full enough. And besides, what did they really know about David Swenson except that he had a steady job so he'd be able to pay his rent? If only she'd been able to convince herself with that act!

Marcy smiled with satisfaction upon seeing the wheelchair pushed to one side in the bedroom. It meant this was one of her mother's better days, and

she could maneuver without it. Martha sat in her favorite chair in the window bay, bathed in the warmth of the spring sunlight. She was busily reading—her favorite occupation. As Marcy watched, the silver-haired woman turned the page with a rubbertipped stick. It had been a long time since her arthritis-crippled hand had been able to accomplish even this mundane task.

"If this weather holds up, you'll be able to sit outside soon," Marcy promised, as she bent to place a kiss on the still-unlined cheek.

"I'm looking forward to it," Martha agreed with patient anticipation. She looked acutely at her daughter with eyes that were just as gray as Marcy's. "I thought I saw David's car in the driveway. Is he back?"

Marcy gave a credible shrug of indifference. "He's here, but who can say for how long? He said he'd be over to take care of the back rent, so you can ask him." She looked ruefully over her grubby jeans. "I'd better shower first before making your tea," referring to the pleasant afternoon break they always indulged in when Marcy wasn't at work. Today, however, she wished she could avoid it. She knew what subject would occupy most of the conversation.

When they'd decided to turn the dining room into her mother's bedroom, Marcy had taken over the maid's quarters in back of the kitchen for herself so that she could be closer to her. It was also more practical to close off the second floor to save on the expense of maintenance and heating in the winter.

When she heard the firm steps on the back porch just outside her room and the screen door slam shut,

Marcy wished fervently that she could be safely in her old room upstairs. It was just like David to enter without knocking as if he still had the right in spite of his six-month disappearing act!

Hearing his deep voice greeting her mother, she turned the faucet on in her shower full force so that the sound of the water would drown out erupting memories of deep-throated laughs that they'd shared, of husky murmurings whispered in her ear. *No*, she told herself fiercely. Hadn't she spent enough effort in placing that all in the past? At twenty-eight she should have long ago lost all gullibility to a man's seductive wooings. Surely she'd learned something from his indifference!

After all, Bolivia wasn't in outer space. He certainly had to keep in touch with his home office, and though he'd warned her that he hated writing letters, it wouldn't have hurt him to have at least sent a card. Even an innocuous "having a wonderful time, wish you were here," would have been better than the tearing emptiness that she'd lived through over not even knowing where he was.

She listened intently at the door to make certain she didn't hear any conversation before leaving the sanctuary of her rooms, then grimaced in anger over her childish behavior. This was her house, for heaven's sake! Hadn't she finally gotten herself squared away so that she could again enjoy going out? No vanishing Don Juan was ever again going to rule her heart.

Marcy stepped into the kitchen and barely managed to swallow a cry of protest. Moving with assur-

ance, David was lifting cups and saucers from the cabinet and placing them on a tray. Three sets, she noticed sourly. The teakettle began its warning whistle, and thankfully, he turned his back to shut off the stove. It gave Marcy the necessary time to erase all telltale signs of her reaction to seeing him performing that task just as he had done so often in the past.

He had changed into comfortable jeans and a long-sleeved, plaid cotton shirt. Her gaze swept hungrily over the broad shoulders and the long sweep to the narrow waist and hips accented by the snug fit of the jeans. He reached for the teakettle only to draw his hand back with a muffled oath. He rubbed his left arm before lifting the kettle with his other hand. Recalling vaguely that he'd favored the same arm when talking to her in the garden, Marcy wondered if he'd pulled a muscle.

He paused when turning and saw her framed in the doorway. She was shocked by the naked hunger in his eyes as they swept in appreciation over the low-scooped neckline of her dress that accented the firm curve of her breasts and molded her trim waist and the feminine flare of her hips.

Why had she worn this revealing dress when she usually relaxed in slacks? Marcy berated herself. Her skin, still flushed from the brisk rub she'd subjected it to after her shower, became rosier as his eyes lingered on the agitated rise and fall of her breasts. *No!* she protested firmly, she wasn't going to let him tear at her carefully reconstructed life.

"Making yourself at home?" she giped as she forced

herself to walk casually into the kitchen. "I see you talked yourself into having tea with us."

He stared at her intently as he heard the rejection in her cool voice. "Martha invited me," he corrected gently. "And when she informed me that you were showering after your stint in the garden, I offered to start things for you. Is Earl Grey satisfactory?"

The question was academic since he was already pouring boiling water into the teapot. That's just like his usual high-handed way of taking over, she groused silently as she ignored him and selected some cookies that her mother especially liked. She refused to look at him as she arranged the delicacies on a plate. When she stalked out of the room with the platter, she was all too vibrantly aware he was just a step behind her, carrying the tea tray.

Marcy knew she was acting childishly during the next half hour. She offered little to the conversation, sitting in stony silence most of the time. What was he doing here, acting as if they should accept him back in their midst as if the last few months hadn't existed?

It soon became obvious that in spite of her mother's gentle questioning, David had no intention of revealing anything about what he had worked at during the six months he'd been away, except for generalities about Bolivia that she was certain could be picked up from any encyclopedia.

"Are you still at Danielson's?" he asked, referring to the department store where Marcy had worked as a junior buyer. It was an obvious attempt at steering the conversation away from him.

"Yes," Marcy answered shortly.

"She's just been promoted, too. She's in charge of the women's fashion department," her mother said proudly, when it became obvious Marcy had no intention of offering that information.

"Congratulations!" he said warmly. "I know you worked hard for it."

But you resented that extra time I had to put into it, Marcy wanted to add bitterly. You didn't want me to go to that convention even though I explained how necessary it was at that point in my career. In retaliation, you took off without leaving a note or a word to Martha . . . or me.

She bit down hard on a cookie, afraid the hot words of renunciation would begin to pour out. The room was becoming too warm; his presence was making her feel claustrophobic, almost trapped. "I'll leave you two to your tea," she said, wishing her cup hadn't clattered so when she placed it on the tray. David, always astute, would certainly pick up on that revealing show of temperament. "I have some paperwork to finish." Even to her it sounded like a lame excuse, but it was all she could come up with at that moment.

David rose lazily as she poised in flight, and it was driven home to her afresh how he could seem to tower over her even though he was only three inches over her five feet eight. "I haven't had time to restock my kitchen as yet, and I was hoping you'd be free to go out to dinner with me."

His expression was unreadable, but Marcy sensed the urgency behind the request. Dinner was the last

thing she wanted with David. Her greatest need was to get away from him and to reaffirm her avowal not to become involved with him again.

"I already have a dinner engagement," she stated coolly and felt a perverse pleasure in the momentary flash of annoyance? . . . pain? revealed in his eyes.

"Marcy always prepares too much for me when she goes out. Won't you join me?" her mother interjected quickly into the strained atmosphere. Her gaze was a silent rebuke that brought a faint blush to Marcy's cheeks.

David turned to the perturbed woman with a gallant bow. "My pleasure," he said. "And if you're not too tired, may I challenge you to a game of gin? I haven't had the opportunity to play since our last battle of wits, so I shall be at your mercy."

His steps crossing the back porch short minutes later alerted her when he left. She paced the room for another half hour, forced to remain because of her fabricated remark about paperwork that needed to be finished.

How could—no, how *dare* he reenter her life and cause this instant upheaval? she ranted in a rising fury at herself. She'd given of herself to him completely, and he'd tricked her by his gentle persuasion into believing he returned her love. She paused in her restless pacing, her fingernails digging halfmoons into her palms as she recalled how that initial tenderness had quickly escalated into a soul-burning passion that had swept them into even greater spiraling heights of sensual delight.

Finding no resolution to her rampaging memories, she was driven from her room. Needing something stronger than tea to settle her nerves, she paused in the pantry to mix herself a drink. She wasn't ready to face Martha, knowing she'd want answers for her abrupt responses to David, but her mother must have heard the clinking of glass and called out to her.

Taking a fortifying gulp from the cocktail to help her parry the expected questions, Marcy went reluctantly to her mother's room.

The questions didn't come, but she would have faced them gladly rather than to comply with her mother's request.

"Since you're going out this evening, don't you think you'd better take some towels and fresh linen and make David's bed before you go?" she questioned gently.

It was a logical request that Marcy couldn't deny, even while her mind ruled over going to David's apartment and being alone with him while doing that intimate job—intimate because of the time they'd spent there on rumpled sheets.

She quickly drained her glass and walked with leaden feet to the linen closet, realizing that everything that had happened since David's return had been just a prelude to the confrontation that lay before her.

CHAPTER TWO

Marcy walked the one-hundred-odd feet along the driveway to the carriage house, acutely conscious of the rebellion building up in her against what had to be done. If only she hadn't taken on this duty that first day!

She paused at the side door that led to the apartment above as memories of that first meeting flooded into her mind. She and her mother had discussed the possibility of renting the two rooms as an efficiency apartment as soon as they'd received the notice of an increase in the tax rate. During her spare time Marcy had cleaned out a decade of accumulated junk and dust and had coerced her current boyfriend to help her paint the rooms. She'd been surprised one evening when she came home from work to find that the rooms were rented and that the man who had rented them was already there unpacking his suitcases.

"He seems like a very nice gentleman," Martha had announced with a gentle smile, and she had explained further that he came highly recommended by one of her afternoon bridge-playing friends. "He works out of

the same office as Bertha's husband," she continued, reminding Marcy of the international status of the construction company that tackled everything from building roads through impenetrable jungles to building hydroelectric dams. "He won't be here all the time since he's a troubleshooter for the company and his job takes him all over. He's mainly interested in a place that he can use as a home base."

Which should have warned Marcy, but at that time she'd been pleased at the thought that their own privacy would be only intermittently invaded. As now, her mother had then sent her over with the necessary linen when Marcy had realized that the bed hadn't been made.

Marcy started up the stairs, recalling how that first day she'd trotted up with interest, admittedly piqued to see what the new boarder looked like.

He'd called a "Come in!" to her knock, and she'd juggled the pile of linen awkwardly in her arms as she tried to turn the doorknob. The door had been jerked open, pulling her in. The linen had cascaded over the floor as she tried to regain her balance, and Marcy had found herself crashing against a broad expanse of hard chest.

Singed forever in her mind was the feel of iron muscles and the firm heartbeat under her hand. The single word "Oh!" passed through her lips as she raised startled eyes to meet dark brown ones glinting with laughter scant inches above hers.

"Well!" he said, and Marcy had her first introduction to the jolting effect produced by David's slow, lop-

sided grin. "I think I'll keep this place if it comes with such fetching maid service!"

His hand had clasped her upper arms in support, but then they tightened even as Marcy felt herself sway closer to him. The laughter had fled from his eyes, to be replaced with a new light as they shifted to the succulent invitation of her still-pursed lips.

Marcy knew he was going to kiss her even before she was aware that she was anticipating that contact. But he hesitated a second too long, giving her time to snap out of her momentary madness, and she pulled from his hold. What in the world had come over her, desiring a kiss from a man even before they'd introduced themselves!

David had then joined her in picking up the scattered linen, and in that ignominious position they'd exchanged names in between jumbled apologies for their unusual meeting. David's grin had broadened, and Marcy's usual sense of humor quickly surfaced. By the time everything had been retrieved, they were laughing together as old friends over the incident.

Placing the sheets at the foot of his bed, she started for the door, then hesitated when seeing his quizzical gaze fasten on the bed. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Will you indulge me by showing me how to put that together?" he asked, waving to the linen. Seeing her bewildered expression, he gave an embarrassed laugh. "My job has me living in hotels or using sleeping bags, so I'm afraid that part of my education has been skipped."

And that was how the weekly ritual began, and by the time David had to leave to investigate a problem area two weeks later, she'd experienced the thrill of his kisses many times.

All too many times, Marcy admitted as she continued up the stairs. How innocently she'd walked into his trap! This time it would be different. Bitter experience had made her a wiser person.

Shifting her bundle, she rapped sharply at his door. Gone were the days when she'd tap lightly, then walk in eagerly without waiting for his response.

His "Come in!" was too reminiscent of that first meeting, and Marcy grasped the knob gingerly, careful that the same accident didn't befall her. In spite of her resolve that she wouldn't allow David's return to mean anything to her, she was all too aware of her own weaknesses where he was concerned. One touch, and the wall erected so carefully could all too easily be breached.

She stepped into the room as David emerged from the bathroom, his hands and face dripping water. "That's what I call perfect timing!" he greeted her, whipping a towel from the top of the stack she held and giving himself a quick rub. "I started washing before I realized there were no towels."

"We didn't have any advance notice about when you planned to return," she reminded him coolly, as she stalked by him. "So you'll have to excuse us for being so remiss. You're lucky Martha reminded me before I left."

She stacked the towels on the shelf before sweep-

ing past him to the bedroom to begin to make his bed. She was all too aware of him watching her from the doorway but refused to acknowledge his presence.

She ran her hand over the bedspread, smoothing the last wrinkle, putting off the confrontation she knew was inevitable. She knew he wouldn't tolerate the impasse she'd created for long, but she didn't want to hear empty excuses about why he hadn't contacted her since he left. There were too many hours in six months, and one of them must have been free so he'd have time to send a line about where he'd disappeared to.

He'd vanished, leaving food in the small kitchenette, and she'd waited two worry-filled weeks for him to return before throwing out the contents of the compact refrigerator. By that time her mother had heard from her friend Bertha through her husband that David had been sent off on one of his troubleshooting jobs, though she had no more information to offer than that. The frightening anxiety that had been haunting her that he could be lying someplace a victim of an accident turned into a seething anger. It was more a face-saving emotion, she finally realized, than the willingness to face the fact that he lived by the code "out of sight, out of mind."

David remained in the doorway when she straightened, and she glared at him warily, trying to second-guess his intentions. The sun was setting, and the fading light in the room accented his unusually pale features. For the first time she gave full attention to his face and saw new lines bracketing his mouth.

She halted her concern from showing as her earli-

er awareness of his weariness returned. "You look like you're suffering from jet lag," she said softly, and gritted her teeth in annoyance for letting that small token of her concern slip out.

He nodded slightly. "I was thinking of taking a nap before accepting your mother's invitation." His gaze slipped to the bed table, then to the dresser. "Is the alarm clock still around? I don't want to oversleep."

"It's in the drawer where you put it." Marcy caught her breath as her face paled, then flushed under a wave of heat. Their eyes met and clung as memories came to vivid life of their last meeting in this room, this bed.

The alarm's strident ring had awakened them from a deep sleep. Marcy again felt how David's weight had shifted beside her as he'd reached across her to still the clamor. Still shrouded by sleep, she'd looked at the man beside her dazedly, wondering what he was doing in her bed. Then everything came flooding back in exquisite detail. That night she'd finally been unable to deny what they both had at first tried to avoid. Ever since their first meeting, they'd skirted the attraction that had been building with increasing force, trying to satisfy their heightening awareness with occasional kisses that only whetted their appetites for more. No longer able to deny what they craved, together they'd explored uncharted frontiers that had proven more exquisitely wonderful than she'd ever dreamed.

Realizing in alarm that she had to get to her room to get ready for her flight to Philadelphia and the convention that she had to attend, she'd tried to get up. David had instead tossed the alarm clock in the table

drawer and slammed it shut, a satisfied grin forming. He'd then lowered his head to bury his face in the warm valley between her breasts, and once again all coherent thought had fled. Later, she'd barely made it to the plane on time

For two days she'd floated in a golden haze, barely able to make sense of the workshops she attended. All thoughts were of the incredible beauty of what they'd shared. How could this one man have caused her to feel so vibrantly feminine!

She'd agonized on the plane trip back, wondering how it could fly so slowly and still maintain airspeed. Every nerve ending, every fiber had been tingling in expectation as she counted the hours, then the minutes she had to endure before seeing David again.

She'd arrived home to her mother's announcement. A friend had come to take her for a ride the day before, she explained, and when she'd returned, she'd noticed David's car was gone, and she hadn't heard from him since.

It was the beginning of Marcy's long slide into bewilderment that turned into anger and finally to bitter acceptance. One night of love was no foundation upon which to build dreams.

That hard-won lesson now gave Marcy the strength to break the compelling eye contact with David. Her gaze dropped to the towel crushed in his hands.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to dress so I'll be ready when Glen arrives," she said, in a voice that betrayed none of the traitorous turmoil the memories had stirred deep within her.

"I've waited a long time for this day and was looking forward to our first evening together. Can't I talk you into canceling with him?" David asked persuasively.

Marcy's eyebrows rose in indignation at his casual assumption that she'd even think of falling in with his plans. "If my mother's invitation doesn't please you, you'll have to go elsewhere for your entertainment," she said dismissively.

David's eyelids closed, hiding a surprising look of pain. When he started rubbing his arm again, Marcy chastised herself for thinking even momentarily that her rejection had hurt him. If his arm pained that much, he should see a doctor, she thought, but then she blocked that concern from her mind. David, by his past actions, had to be thought of as her mother's boarder and nothing more. She had to train herself to remember that.

He stepped aside in the doorway, and she walked determinedly past him, praying that he hadn't noticed her flinch when her shoulder inadvertently brushed his chest.

Throughout the evening Marcy struggled valiantly to keep her attention focused on her date. Glen Turner was the head salesman for a prominent fashion house. They'd had a few dates before, all pleasant, but Marcy sensed that he wanted to make their relationship more personal. He was handsome, and they had many points of common interest. But now, with David's unexpected return and the resulting turmoil he'd created, Marcy found herself too distracted to pay more than

surface attention to him.

"Is something bothering you, Marcy?" he asked, while topping their wineglasses. Catching her startled glance, he gave a rueful smile. "We haven't exactly been talking on the same wavelength this evening."

Embarrassed, Marcy took a quick sip from her glass before answering. "I apologize, Glen," she said contritely. "It was my day off, and I spent it working in the garden. I guess all that fresh air and unaccustomed exercise has left me tired." It was a lame excuse and only partially true, but the best she could come up with.

He accepted her excuse after a thoughtful perusal of her face. "I was going to ask if you wanted to try a new dance band I heard about, but I guess you'd rather head for home."

"If you don't mind?" she asked hopefully. She had an overriding need to be by herself and sort out the conflicting emotions running rampant within her.

"I promise not to work in the garden the next time," she said, when he drove his car into her driveway. She usually invited him in for a cup of coffee, but this time she hesitated. What if David was still there with her mother? she fretted, and was immediately annoyed that the thought of the two men meeting should bother her.

"I'll skip the coffee if you promise to go right to bed," Glen said, drawing her into his arms for a good-night kiss.

Thankful for his consideration, Marcy permitted the kiss to progress further than usual. But when his cool hand cupped her breast, it pulled her from her acquiescence. She slipped from his grasp and stepped quick-

ly from the car before he could get out.

There was no need to feel so violated, she chastised herself, and leaned down to talk through the open window. "Have a successful trip, Glen, and do give me a call when you return." He had told her he was leaving the next day on one of his frequent trips through his territory to push the winter line his company was offering.

"Will do," he said, and with a casual wave eased down the driveway. Marcy watched the red lights until they turned into the roadway, then with a sigh, she searched for her house key.

"That was an interesting farewell. I hope he understands it was his last one."

Marcy gave a muted squeal of fright and watched with pounding heart as David materialized from the shadows cast by a large maple tree. "Wh-what are you doing here spying?" she demanded.

"I wasn't spying," he corrected grimly. "I was taking a short walk before going to bed. I realize you had an obligation to honor your commitment for this evening, since it was made before you knew I'd be back. But after seeing that remarkable demonstration, I decided I wasn't as tolerant as I had planned to be about any others you may have already made."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Marcy exclaimed. "You have no hold over me, David. I have my own life to lead, and you're not part of it anymore."

"I'm talking about you and me and a commitment we made one night six months ago."

His voice, ominously soft, was having a disturbing

effect on her. "You're not making sense, David Swensen! I never made any such thing!" she cried beligerently. He was looming too close, and she took a defensive step backward before she stopped in sudden rebellion. She wouldn't let him know this sudden fear that spiraled through her.

"I understand that you were unprepared for my return," he said kindly, stopping in reaching distance from her. "I was also tired. I've just gone through a few difficult days in Washington and then had to spend hours in the New York office to start catching up on the time I was away."

He paused. His eyes glittered from the reflection of the porch lights as they slid slowly over her. Why was she trembling like this as if she were being possessed?

"I felt better after my nap," he continued patiently, "and had time to reevaluate a few things. I was better able to understand the reason for your cool reception and decided you needed time to get the resentment out of your system. But when I saw that demonstration in the car just now, I realized I wasn't as tolerant as I had planned to be."

The gentle tone of his voice firmed with regret. "I find I'm not a sharing man, Marcy, and you're mine."

Marcy's mouth worked helplessly a few seconds before she could get out a disbelieving laugh. "You're out of your mind!" she cried in scorn. "I don't belong to anyone, least of all you!"

His hands closed over her shoulders before she could step away. "Oh, Marcy," he chastised gently, "didn't your mother teach you never to tell lies?"

She trembled violently as she watched with wide-eyed fascination as his face came inexorably closer.

CHAPTER THREE

She should run, she should fight, she should do anything but wait expectantly as she was doing. His lips were cool from the night air as they brushed hers and a soft sigh escaped as Marcy folded against him. She could fool herself no longer. This was where she belonged, where she wanted . . . *ached* to be ever since he'd appeared in the garden. It was all wrong, against all that her common sense warned her about but for this moment in time she had to let herself bask in the wonder of once again being in his arms. She'd been wandering in the desert, thirsty, all too long.

His arms enfolded her in a gentle embrace. He stared into her heavy-lidded face, as if relearning each curve, each color variance. Then, with a slight smile of anticipation, his lips parted to gently settle over hers.

When the tip of his tongue teased her lips, her resistance was only token before she permitted his invasion. But having conquered, he was a kind master, claiming his territorial rights subtly so that she gave freely of all he demanded.

His strong arms tightened their hold, crushing her

breasts against the hard wall of his broad chest. His large hands shifted, sliding over the silken material of her dress in a restless demand as he pulled her slim body even tighter against his firm contours. His long tapered fingers splayed over the sides of her rib cage as his thumbs investigated the softness of her breasts.

When he finally raised his head, Marcy lifted her lids, heavy with arousal, to gaze at him. The breeze ruffled his tawny hair into a tousled mane, and in her bemused state he seemed a lion ready to roar his territorial rights. He stared down at her; the smile curving his lips was the smile of victory.

It was that smile that cut through the mists fogging Marcy's mind. What type of fool was she, falling into his arms on demand! Hadn't she promised that this was one route she wasn't going to follow?

Her twist caught him off guard. Once free, she fled up the three steps to the front door. She stopped in frustration as she pawed through her purse for her key, craving the security of the closed door between them.

"Marcy?" The single word was a demand. "What are you running from?"

She paused in her search to glare at him. The porch light outlined his lean form at the foot of the steps as he stared quizzically up at her.

"I'm not running. I've had a busy day, and I'm tired," she corrected haughtily, denying fiercely the pounding of her heart, the weakness that still controlled her legs, and—heaven help her—the overwhelming desire to be back in those arms.

He gave a small exasperated sigh. "I guess I'll have

to give you a little more time."

She glared at him. The arrogance of the man! "Time is what you don't have. You used up six months of it," she snapped. "I must thank you for the letters you sent. It was so reassuring to hear where you were. Of course, I understand that meeting all those interesting people in Bolivia must have given you little time to write to those you left behind, to let them at least know where you'd disappeared to!"

His lips thinned under her sarcastic attack. "It's a long story, Marcy. One I plan to tell you someday. But for now, can't you give me your trust? Surely you must know that I'd never willingly do anything to hurt you," he begged.

His abrupt change in attitude momentarily confused her, but finally her anger resurfaced. "Trust!" she threw back at him. "What have you ever done that would make me want to trust you?"

"We spent a night in each other's arms," David murmured, his voice deepening with memories. "We made a commitment—"

"Commitment!" Marcy exclaimed. What was he trying to do with his talk about trust and commitment? A chill touched her as she felt herself wanting desperately to believe his words.

She jabbed the key into the lock and rushed through the door, slamming it behind her. What was the matter with her, she fumed, as she leaned against the paneled wood for support. Her chest was heaving as if she'd run a mile, and she was aware of a cold sweat beading her forehead.

He spoke of trust and commitment, and wasn't that what she'd wanted, craved, needed from him? Yet, could she possibly give them when he'd done nothing to earn them? The six months had given her the distance so she could analyze more clearly the series of events that had ended in that final flaming encounter. At no time had he given her any reason to offer trust, far less to enter into any commitment with him. Did he really think that all he had to do was ask and she was his?

She gave a short bitter laugh as she snapped off the lights and made her way to her rooms in back of the house. Did he make similar claims on other lovers wherever he happened to be stationed?

Her eyes burned from staring wide-eyed at the darkened ceiling when later she crawled into bed. Memories rolled over her, and after the series of shocks that had hit her through the day, she had no defense to ward them off.

She'd been so innocently happy those first two weeks that David had spent in the apartment before being sent to a trouble spot at a dam site in Kenya! She'd been well aware of the sparks of electricity that sizzled between them when together, and she—simpleton that she'd been—had enjoyed the heightened awareness it had given her. It had made her feel delightfully feminine in ways she'd never before experienced. She became unreasonably proud that she could cause this challenging man's eyes to glint with tantalizing lights whenever he looked at her. She discovered playing with fire held a definite allure, and it became

a game she never expected would end with such heartache.

David had passed his thirty-sixth birthday, had a very responsible job, and had seen much of the world. Experience had left its mark on his craggy features, carving them with firm lines that accented his inherent forceful determination. She should have read his character more carefully.

Marcy could hardly remember who she'd been dating at the time, but when a girl friend's date couldn't make it, she'd asked David if he would stand in, telling him they'd had tickets to see a Broadway play for a long time and her friend had bought a new dress for the occasion.

He'd given his lopsided grin that from the beginning had sent little threads of excitement through her. He'd agreed readily enough, stating he couldn't let the dress go to waste. But somehow the evening had ended with their becoming a twosome, leaving Marcy amused over how subtly he'd accomplished it.

While fascinated by the feelings that he engendered in her, Marcy recalled her instinctive attempts to hold back; something in her knew from the first that an involvement with David could be as dangerous as stepping in quicksand.

She'd never met a man of David's caliber. One minute he was arrogantly self-assured, and when she instinctively backed away, he became gently persuasive. Yet, she was always aware of the underlying rock-hard core of his personality that would keep him unswervingly on whatever course he chose. She could

understand it was a necessary prerequisite of his job, but when it was aimed at her, Marcy found any resistance she hoped to erect instantly crumbling.

Perversely, David had made no attempt to kiss her. By the end of the first week, she'd been helplessly lost in a web of her own weaving. She found herself wondering if his kiss would live up to the promise of his sensuous mouth, and how his muscular arms would feel holding her against his broad chest.

Marcy became irritated by her increasing obsession with the man. But mingled with her irritation was an exhilarating sense of adventure. It wasn't long before she knew it was inevitable that they'd explore the attraction between them. Why, then, was he holding back? Why was he passing up all the opportunities she'd presented him with to indulge in that kiss that they both were so clearly anticipating?

She shivered on suspecting the obvious reason. It was as if he were the hunter, and he knew by prolonging the hunt the capture would be all the more satisfying. She marveled that he was able to maintain such tight control over his own desire. It became a foregone conclusion that by the time David closed the trap, Marcy would be a willing victim.

Trying to abort the invading sensations her memories were building, Marcy turned restlessly in bed and pounded her pillow into submission in a hopeless attempt to banish the unwanted remembrances. Victim? By the time David had ended the kiss, she'd had the soul-shattering conviction that they both had been victims . . . and winners.

The memories took over with startling clarity even as she fought them. It had started innocently enough when she'd gone to his apartment with a change of linen. Delia came to clean their home three times a week, but Marcy never examined the reason why she hadn't added the garage apartment to the woman's list of chores. Her excuse had been that it didn't take long to do the two rooms by herself, and it wasn't fair to burden the hardworking woman with this extra job.

As had been her habit, Marcy left David's bed until last, not able to deny the salacious enjoyment aroused by the sight of the rumpled sheets. He'd been slowly driving her crazy by his prolonged taunting, she admitted ruefully, and she wondered when he intended to collect his prize. Surely he must have known that she was beyond offering even a token of resistance.

She shook her head wonderingly over her anticipation as she slipped on the clean pillowcase. For heaven's sake, she was no child, so why would he think she needed all this priming? She reached for the other pillow to repeat the process. It still held the imprint of his head, and with a soft groan, she'd buried her face in it, inhaling deeply of the lingering, mixed woody yet musky scent that was uniquely David's. If he didn't end her frustration shortly, she vowed fiercely, she was going to take matters into her own hands. The impasse had gone on long enough. Game time was over.

The prickles along her spine were her first warning that she wasn't alone. She clutched the pillow defensively to her breast as she turned and stared

defiantly at David standing inside the doorway. There was an odd gleam in his dark eyes as he took in her revealing hold on the pillow, and then his eyes transfixed her with their intensity. Oh my, yes, game time was over, she admitted, and fine tremors slithered through her as David walked slowly toward her to collect his prize. His powerful male magnetism reached out to immobilize her and had her waiting with tingling expectancy.

He plucked the pillow from nerveless hands and tossed it on the bed as his eyes remained locked on hers. She saw him now with a strange sort of heightened awareness. His eyes were torched with a fire she'd never encountered before. For a moment she was frightened and she faltered over whether she was woman enough to handle what was to come.

His arms slid around her and slowly, with erotic expertise, he fitted her into perfect alignment with the hard thrust of his body. Only then did he bend his head to take her waiting lips.

She felt as if her senses would explode, as if she were in the midst of a sunburst of exquisite prisms of light that kept expanding and re-forming while she throbbed to the burning ache rising from within her that quickly flowed throughout her body.

Her world rocked as he deepened the kiss. His hunger became hers, and her arms circled his neck in her need to feed and be fed. He drank her soft moans as he offered his in return until she felt she couldn't live, couldn't breathe unless she became part of him.

It had been only their need for air that slowly forced

an end to the kiss. Panting softly, they stared at each other for endless seconds, both showing the effects of the powerful reaction they'd just experienced.

"My God," David breathed in an explosion of sound. He placed her head on his shoulder, then fastened his arms around her in fierce possession. He didn't need to say more. . . . Marcy was shaking in total response.

The harsh sound of car doors slamming and the high pitch of several women's voices intruded into their world. Marcy groaned a protest as the voices receded into the house.

"Oh Lord, I forgot," she wailed, burying her face in the warm curve of his neck. "Mom's bridge club meets tonight, and I'm supposed to have their dessert and tables set up."

"You have to go?" David asked, unbelieving.

"Yes, and I'd better hurry before she sends someone to get me," Marcy said, drawing back reluctantly while wondering if her legs were capable of carrying her down the stairs.

"You'll come back afterwards?" It was a demand, underlined with unabated hunger.

She shook her head in apology. "I've already promised to fill in for someone who couldn't make it."

A muttered oath seared the air as he stared at her in frustration before releasing his hold. "Then you'd better go," he said coolly. "We can't have the ladies waiting, can we?"

She stared at him wide-eyed, unable to compre-

hend his sudden rejection. A tight smile pulled at his lips, and he shook his head at her confusion.

"You'd better leave, Marcy," he said warningly. "My control has been stretched to the limit. You wouldn't want your mother's friends to find you on that bed, and that's just where you'll be heading if you remain one second longer."

A flush rose from her neck, and suddenly Marcy felt exhilaratingly happy. That cataclysmic kiss had affected him as deeply as it had her! Her eyes lit with a teasing laugh as she placed a light kiss on his mouth before dancing quickly out of his reach. There was tomorrow and the tomorrows after that, she laughed happily to herself as she tripped down the stairs.

Only it didn't work out that way. The next afternoon her mother suffered a flare-up of her arthritic condition and was confined to bed. Their kissing was limited to a delirious exchange stolen on the back porch. The next day David was called away to solve a problem that had arisen in Kenya, and for three months Marcy had waited as if in suspended animation for his return. At least that time he'd sent two short notes that mainly reassured her that he was looking forward to his return, on which she had to put her own interpretation.

Marcy shook away her memories and rose from her rumpled bed in disgust to pull the sheets in order. Their chaotic condition was expressive of the state to which David had reduced her well-ordered life. Trust, he'd demanded, and a commitment, she grouched as she

slipped back into bed. Where did he come off, demanding them of her! Surely not on the basis of those two kisses.

He was too virile a man, had shown too much expertise. Was she supposed to believe that during those three months away he hadn't held another woman in his arms, hadn't made her tremble with the excitement of his kisses?

Under the blanket, Marcy curled into a defensive ball against the pain the thought resurrected. She was the one who'd been the fool and had avoided dating during that time. It had seemed somehow repellent that another man's mouth should sully the imprint that David had branded on her lips.

Too restless to remain in bed, Marcy rose and stared unseeingly out the window. It would have been smarter if she'd gone out with several men at that time to negate the hold he'd placed on her.

When David had returned that first time after three months absence, he'd exuded an overwhelming aura of power, of impossible tasks successfully completed, of lands visited and conquered. Marcy had prided herself on the veneer of sophistication her job had given her. She held a responsible position, but in comparison to his worldwide travels, her business trips through the megalopolis that comprised New York City and the surrounding area became insignificant. What in the world could he possibly see in her, she had wondered in a moment of panic.

At least that time he'd notified her of his coming, and Marcy recalled how she'd hurried home to cut a

bowlful of flowers from the garden and had placed it on his coffee table as a welcome. She'd stepped back to admire them when the door had been flung open behind her.

Even after all this time, Marcy remembered acutely the thrill of joy that had shot through her on seeing David once again. He'd been gloriously bronzed, and there were sun-bleached streaks in his honey-dark hair. His presence immediately filled the room, banishing the emptiness that had haunted her since his departure.

His eyes glowed with happiness and surprise, but by the time he'd dropped the suitcase he'd been carrying and had reached her side, his obvious desire had her lashes drifting down in sudden shyness.

He feathered her cheeks with his fingers before raising her chin so she was forced to look at him. His smile held a quiet understanding before his lips brushed hers. He seemed to sense that a three-month gap had to be bridged before they could continue where they'd left off.

"You can have no idea what it does to me to see you here waiting for me," he murmured huskily. "You've been all too much on my mind, Marcy Brown. I can only hope I've haunted you a little in return."

His hands dropped away, but he didn't step back. His eyes searched her face as if needing to reaffirm a memory, and Marcy realized she was doing the same. The hunger lay only partly camouflaged as if waiting for her to light the match that would bring it to flame, and Marcy suddenly wondered over her hesitancy. David was back! The realization hit her then that the

waiting was over, and she became thrillingly, joyfully alive.

"David," she'd whispered achingly. Her hands sliding up his arms and over the broad shoulders had been a supplication and a promise.

Marcy placed her fevered forehead on the cool windowpane as she remembered ecstasy of that kiss re-created the same havoc. David had groaned, "Marcy, sweet love," and had swept her into the heaven of his embrace. Yes, she had lit the match and had been consumed in the blaze.

She moved restlessly across the room, still amazed that they hadn't ended that kiss in his bedroom. The desire had been there, pulsing, demanding, yet he somehow had maintained control of the situation. He had the control; she gave him full credit for it. She'd been lost beyond rational thought. Had he sensed that in spite of the moment's acquiescence she held ambivalent feelings about that final surrender?

There'd been no reason for feeling the way she did. Deep within her she had known that ultimately she'd succumb to what they both wanted.

But underlying it all, she was aware, was the threatening sense of fear that once she gave of herself, she could be making an irretrievable commitment that would bind her to him for the rest of her life. David had been honest from the beginning that his job precluded marriage, that it wouldn't be fair to any woman to tie herself to him when he never knew where his next job would be or how long it would last. Had that been the real reason for her vacillations?

Her hands pushed through the long silky strands of her pale blond hair in morose resignation. Events had proven her fear correct. She recalled how after his return David had had to spend long hours catching up with reports in his New York headquarters, and she'd been involved in buying for the Christmas season so that they'd had little more than stolen minutes. It was ten days before they could arrange any time for a date.

Her eyes heavy with memories, Marcy stared out of her window at the carriage house sitting at the back of the property. The apartment was dark, meaning David was getting his much-needed sleep.

She frowned, momentarily distracted over the reason behind the lines of weariness on his too-pale face.

She shrugged away her concern as she picked out the outline of his bedroom windows through the intervening branches of newly budded trees, and that fateful evening came flooding back. Their dinner date that night had ended there, as they both knew it would. The electric tension between them had escalated to such a degree that there was no other way the evening could have terminated.

How could anything that had been so wild and wonderful have ended by giving her so many hours of heartache! David spoke of commitment. He'd already had it from her, but she'd never let him know. After giving of herself so completely, she'd become irrevocably his. But there was one thing that she could no longer give him. Trust had to be earned, and after his disappearing act, she could come up with no reason to give him that.

Marcy walked silently to the kitchen to heat some milk. Tomorrow was Sunday and there was still a lot of work to be done in the garden and she needed her sleep. She had to stop the invading memories that held no answers. After six months with no communication, David was back, and while she acknowledged the thrill that his presence gave her, she'd have to be on guard that he wouldn't erode the ground she'd finally gained in achieving peace of mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Did you have a nice time with Glen?" her mother asked the next morning, when Marcy brought to her room the breakfast tray that they always shared. Mornings were always difficult for her until her arthritis-stiffened joints loosened.

Marcy stared at her blankly. All memory of the dinner she'd had with Glen the night before had been wiped from her mind by her confrontation with David. "It was pleasant as usual. He'll be gone for a while to push his company's line of winter clothes." The fact that a store had to buy all its clothes for the fall and winter season when it was still spring had long since stopped amazing her.

"It looks like his persistence has won," Martha teased lightly. "Pardon the old-fashioned phrase, but it seems like he's been rushing you lately."

Marcy's slight shrug showed her indifference. His persistence had won only because she'd finally decided she'd been acting the fool by becoming a recluse.

"I think he's a charming gentleman," Martha added, subtly placing her stamp of approval on whichever

choice her daughter might make.

Her mother had let her know innumerable times, Marcy conceded, that she was concerned over the years slipping by. Martha had often told her daughter that she'd be willing to sell the house, move into a smaller place, and pay for a companion rather than have Marcy harbor any feeling of obligation that might stop her from creating a life of her own.

"He's nice enough," Marcy admitted unenthusiastically. "Now drink your coffee while it's still hot."

"I thought David looked poorly, didn't you?" Martha asked, accepting the change of subject by choosing one that Marcy desired even less. "He's lost some weight and seemed quite pale to me."

Oh, yes, she'd noticed, Marcy thought. She'd catalogued every deepened line on his face, had felt every ounce of weight he'd lost when she pressed against him during that kiss. Unfortunately, her senses were all too aware of every change about the man. "Did he?" she replied dismissively, skimming a layer of marmalade over a piece of toast before handing it to her mother. It was an effective way to avoid the probing look she was receiving. David had spread his charm with a generous hand, and she knew her mother hoped that something would develop between them. If only she knew!

"He did say he didn't think to bring anything to stock his kitchen," Martha persisted. "Why don't you go and invite him to have breakfast here? You make the most inspired omelets."

"He's renting the apartment, Mother," Marcy re-

turned truculently, "not paying for room and board!"

"Marcy!" the older woman exclaimed in shocked displeasure. "David isn't a plumber, yet he changed the washers in the faucets when we had a problem. He isn't a glazier, yet he put a new pane of glass in the window when a branch broke it during that storm."

Feeling properly chastised, Marcy couldn't prevent her embarrassment from staining her cheeks. "If he's as tired as you say, he'll probably sleep late. I'll be working in the garden, and if I see him, I'll extend your invitation." It was the best that she could offer in appeasement. She refused to be talked into going near David's apartment.

Several hours later Marcy stretched to ease her tired muscles while surveying with satisfaction the length of pruned and raked border she'd been working on. A large, capable hand removed a ball of twine from her clasp, startling her, but she made no protest when David bent to tie the stack of sucker canes she'd cut from the bushes.

She observed with an abstract fascination the way the material of the plaid flannel shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and the way his sinewy arms were exposed by the turned-back cuffs of his shirt. Why was it so disturbing, she wondered, to see the way the sun glinted from the hairs trailing down to his wrists.

He then tucked the bundle under his right arm and carried it to the area for the garbage pickup. Her gaze followed him with an all too revealing hunger, drinking in the way the tight jeans molded his trim waist and hips and accented the strong thrust of his stride.

In a moment of blinding recall, she remembered the texture of his hair-roughened leg as it demanding-ly parted her legs, of the thrill it had produced as it rubbed seductively against the tender skin of her inner thighs.

She sucked in a steadying breath, struggling to still the trembling the memories triggered. By the time David returned, she had managed to dredge up at least a surface calm.

"Good morning . . . or is it afternoon, Marcy?" he said, his slow, lopsided grin causing its usual churning reaction in her. His dark eyes shone with a possessive amusement. "It's comforting to see that nothing changes when you garden. You're wearing your usual smudge on your cheek."

Annoyed by his teasing, she rubbed the spot, unwittingly spreading the grime. His grin widened as he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the area with an overly attentive concentration.

Marcy's lashes drifted closed to hide any telltale reaction her eyes might give away as she submitted stochically to his administrations.

"Aren't you going to say good morning?" he taunted her lazily.

Her eyes flew open as his mouth settled over hers. She absorbed momentarily the way his thick, stubby lashes fanned the high bones of his cheeks and the fine lines radiating from the corners of his eyes before her lashes fluttered down again.

It was instant magic. How could one kiss dissolve bones even while inflaming nerve endings? His mouth

worked over hers with sweet possession, not asking at this time for a deeper commitment as if knowing it was his whenever he should demand full compliance. A sigh of pure pleasure escaped her lips when he ended their capture.

"That, sweet love, is the greeting I was looking for," David said huskily, as he dropped his hand.

Only then did Marcy realize that except for his finger lifting her chin, he'd placed no restraint on her. Why then had she let him kiss her, hadn't at least broken away from him, she wondered in dismay. For by that kiss, tenderly undemanding though it was, she knew he was aware that the commitment he'd desired had been won.

All her hard-fought-for assurances that she was not going to play the game according to his rules had been erased, and the smile of victory that touched the corners of his firm lips told her that he never had held doubts about the outcome.

Marcy had to concede that she, too, had known that he would be the victor once he touched her. And with that admission, all the doubts, the turmoil that had been her bedfellows for far too long, were laid to rest. She loved this exasperating man, and her only hope was that she could cope with the limits he set on their affair.

"Mother said to ask you if you'll join us for lunch," Marcy said, inwardly deriding herself over how her previous resentment had faded as in a mist.

"My pleasure," he said agreeably. "But I don't want to always be on the receiving end. Will you have din-

ner with me tonight? I'd like to have Martha also, if she's up to it."

She caught the fierce expression before it softened, a repeat of the one that had frightened her when he'd come to her out of the shadow of the maple the night before, and she knew he'd permit no other previous engagement to interfere. A surprising exhilaration flickered through her, surprising because she'd expected to feel resentment over his need to dominate.

"Why don't you ask her while I take a quick shower?" she replied, then met his gaze with a sardonic response when his lascivious grin told her explicitly what he'd prefer to do.

Later, David helped by setting up the trays while Marcy folded chives and mushrooms into an omelet. She wished she didn't feel so absurdly happy. Admittedly, nothing had really changed. But with David so close, so devastatingly male that he dominated the kitchen, there was no room for the remembered hurt, the doubts.

They'd come back later to haunt her, she knew, but with the imprint of his kiss still on her mouth, she could think no further than the immediate present. Her senses were drugged with the essence of the man as he moved with quick assurance a few feet from her, and for the present she was content to revel in the joy of having him beside her once again—for whatever period of time he was here.

"Martha declined the invitation," David said, placing a napkin on each tray. "I noticed last night that her

hands are quite a bit worse. She couldn't deal the cards."

The concern in his voice touched Marcy, and she gave a sigh. "Mom feels embarrassed that she has to use specially fitted utensils when she eats," she admitted sadly. "Yet she's so uncomplaining that it tears at me."

David placed a quick consoling kiss on the nape of Marcy's neck as she bent over the stove, sending her mind splintering into bright shards of light. Did he have any inkling of his effect on her, she wondered dazedly as she struggled back to earth and the mundane job of preparing their lunch.

When they were through with the meal, David helped her wash up before leaving, telling her that he still had paperwork to catch up on.

"Wear your sexiest dress," he murmured, his dark eyes holding a smoky promise before bending to brush his lips across hers in a slow kiss. "I'll pick you up at seven."

A slight frown creased her forehead as he skirted the driveway and disappeared up the stairs to his apartment. He didn't look as weary as he'd appeared the day before, but he'd been unsuccessful in hiding several yawns. She hoped he'd let the paperwork go for another day and catch up on his sleep.

Her frown deepened as she spread the towels to dry, and she wished he'd do something about that arm. How had he hurt himself? And with that question, her doubts returned. He'd been remarkably reticent during

lunch about his sojourn in Bolivia, turning aside her mother's tentative inquiries with adroit double-talk. Now that he was gone, taking with him the charisma that held her enthralled, she knew that if he wanted her full trust, he'd have to come up with some answers.

Marcy ended her afternoon in the garden earlier than planned. Driven by the need to look her best, she took a leisurely, scented bath and repaired the damage that garden work did to hands even when protected by gloves.

Sexy dress, he'd demanded, and the flames that the request had ignited flared to new life as she made her selection from her wardrobe.

She'd fallen in love with the dress when she had first seen it modeled during one of her buying trips. She had known right away that she had had to have one for herself. It was a deep violet shade that gave color to her clear gray eyes. The silky jersey knit was cut on a bias that outlined the hidden curves in seductive caresses. It was sleeveless, and the bodice was held up by a wide band of the material which tied in an enticing bow between her breasts. Would David accept the challenge of that bow? One pull and the top would slither to her waist.

She lined her eyelids carefully with kohl, trying to ignore the excitement in her eyes. Tonight . . . tonight . . . yes, perhaps tonight.

David knocked on the door precisely on time. His eyes narrowed slightly when he saw her, and his small wicked smile of anticipation warned her he was working on the riddle of the bow.

"Be right with you," Marcy said, turning swiftly to reach for her matching shawl.

It was plucked from her grasp, and she stood trembling inwardly while his large hand smoothed the soft material over her shoulders. A long finger found the angle of her jaw, and under its pressure, she raised her mouth eagerly for his kiss.

His lips moved slowly, seductively over hers for all too short a time. "Consider that an appetizer," he purred against her mouth, drawing away with a reluctant sigh. "If I taste more, I'll be wanting a full meal . . . now."

She looked at him provocatively from under her lashes. "You mean you're trying to get out of feeding me?"

"Minx!" he warned threateningly, his tightening grip cautioning her to continue at her own risk. "Let's say our good nights to your mother before you tempt me into showing you just what I mean."

The light, teasing mood persisted throughout the meal, and it wasn't until later when he parked his car in the space allotted him in the carriage house that their laughter faded and Marcy felt a new tenseness come over her.

Was he experiencing the same sweet turmoil she was? Triggered by the anticipation of what lay ahead, the small inner fire that had been successfully banked during their dinner stirred, sending tiny flickers of flame through her.

David opened the car door for her and captured her hand. Its tight clasp offered an indication of his

inner tension. They went up the staircase arm in arm, and when the door closed behind them, his hand moved slowly over her shoulders, turning her to him.

She wanted—*ached*—to lean against him, to feel his long, firm body press intimately against hers, but he held her a short space from him, examining her flushed face with understanding eyes.

"We have all night, sweet love," he murmured soothingly. "You can have no idea how many times I dreamed of having you here like this, knowing you want me as much as I do you. I want this to be so special that it will wipe out all those long empty nights. . . ."

His eyes closed briefly, leaving Marcy shaken by the quickly hidden look of dark pain. His face looked drawn and oddly vulnerable.

David, the strong, the invincible . . . gentle, yes, but vulnerable? she wondered in confusion. It was a shattering thought in complete variance with how she viewed him. Her fingers brushed lightly in consoling caresses over his face with her urgent need to erase the disturbing picture.

He captured one hand and placed warm kisses in the palm before nipping the soft cushion of her thumb. She gave a tiny yelp, and his answering laugh was that of the buccaneer knowing the treasure he'd sought was all his. The revealing moment was gone as he sat her on the sofa.

"Brandy or coffee?" he asked, going to the minuscule kitchen. "Or I have this New Zealand wine I picked up to try."

"That sounds interesting," she agreed. "I read some-

where that they were entering the world market."

He worked the cork, then scooped up two glasses before coming to sit beside her. The wine glowed ruby red in the subdued light as he poured some to taste. "Not bad at all," he pronounced, before filling her glass and handing it to her.

"To us," he toasted huskily, touching her glass as he captured her eyes in heated possession. "To sweet surrender, my Marcy."

She clutched the glass tightly to still the revealing tremor in her hand. Was this another part of his request for trust and commitment?

"Will it be a mutual surrender, David?" she questioned carefully. The last time, she'd been so caught up in the thrill of his lovemaking that she'd given of herself unquestioningly. It wasn't until much later that she wondered if he'd even been aware of the depth of her giving. Her love life had been admittedly limited, and she couldn't evaluate how much of his passion was from a true giving of himself or simply a learned expertise.

His eyes widened a fraction as if in surprise at her question. He placed his glass on the table with a deliberate movement before removing hers from her clasp. His large hand closed gently over her shoulder, and Marcy found herself held firmly against the cushions as he shifted to lean over her.

"How could you ask that question?" he demanded as if hurt. He stared down at her, his mouth hovering inches from hers. "Don't you know how it was with me? I couldn't believe my luck to find this vibrantly re-

sponding woman in my arms. I could feel the fire deep within her, and I had an overwhelming need to see if I could bring it to full blaze. Little did I know how quickly I'd be consumed by the conflagration that I'd started, how willing I was to be the victim. Wasn't that what you'd done . . . given completely of yourself? I need that surrender again, sweet love. It was the memory of what we experienced together that kept me going . . ." A tremor shuddered through him as he drew in a deep breath. "Oh, Marcy, honey, I've been aching for you for so long!"

His mouth fastened over hers in a fierce taking as if he needed to demonstrate how unending was his hunger. Marcy was surprised by the force of her own response and then had to admit that her need was every bit as great as his. Her hand fastened in the thick pelt of hair as she offered her mouth for his pillage with a delirious excitement. How had she existed all these months without this man, she wondered dazedly. Their mouths worked in searching unison, draining every drop of the heady elixir they craved, even though they were already drunk from its potency.

It proved not enough for Marcy. Her breasts arched to him in need of a closer contact with his firm chest. Memories flashed of the erotic sensation of how the rough hair there had felt against her sensitized nipples, and her hand moved with restless kneading across his shoulder and down his arm.

David gasped in sudden pain and then pulled sharply away. She stared bewilderedly at his strained expression as his face visibly paled. Her hand was lift-

ed carefully from where it had dug in his upper arm, and only then was she aware of the padding underneath the shirt-sleeve.

"I was right!" she exclaimed, attempting to sit up. "I thought you were favoring that arm. You've been hurt!"

"Forget it," he said brusquely, effectively anchoring her against the cushions with one large hand. "It's not quite healed, and you happened to touch it dead center."

"How did it happen?" Marcy persisted, aware that he was avoiding meeting her eyes.

"It came with the job," he said evasively. "Now forget it, Marcy. We have more important things to discuss. Like you and me and that comfortable bed that's waiting for us."

He lowered his head to nibble persuasively on her lower lip, but Marcy pulled away. Questions crowded into her mind, pressing questions that she needed to have answered. She'd been foolish to think she could accept the dictates of her emotions and submerge all her doubts and fears about David.

"Stop, David," she ordered, as he attempted to caress her face. "I'm not a child to be satisfied by that less than adequate explanation. You've been hurt and quite badly, I'd say. You've lost much of your tan. . . . Was it because you were in a hospital? If so, why didn't you let me know?" The pain that thought produced showed in her voice.

"Were you really in Bolivia?" she pressed on, her mounting agitation clouding her eyes. "If you missed

me as much as you just said, why didn't you ever write? How could you have been so cruel after . . . after that night, you tell me now, was so special?"

David winced, sensing her hurt. Seeing her growing withdrawal, he gave a little sigh of exasperation and released her to reach for his wineglass.

Was he trying to figure out how to doctor his reply so as to satisfy her, she wondered with a bruised feeling of rejection. All the excitement she had felt earlier died. She, too, reached for her glass and sat stiffly in the corner of the sofa nursing a growing disgust over how close she'd come to succumbing to his charismatic charm once again.

David drained his glass before setting it on the table, the loud sound it made telling of his annoyance. He leaned forward with his elbows braced on his knees as he stared at his clasped hands.

"I guess I was a fool to think I could wipe away the past six months as if they weren't there," he said grimly. "God knows I'd like to." He drew in a deep breath before continuing. "I hated it when you left my bed to go to that convention. You'll never know how close you were to being kept prisoner here with the key to the door thrown away!" A fleeting smile raised the corners of his firm mouth. "I was riding a high like I never experienced before. I couldn't wait until you returned."

He paused and plowed his hand through his thick hair. "You had no sooner left than I got a call to get to the office immediately with my travel bag. I knew what that meant—that I was being sent on another assign-

ment. When I heard that it was in Bolivia, I almost told them what they could do with the job.

"They assured me that while it was an emergency, it wouldn't last more than a week or ten days. The plane reservations had been made, and I had less than an hour to make the connections.

"Your mother had gone out with some friends, if you remember, so I couldn't tell her where I was going. I was so pressed for time, I decided not to try to compose a note that I knew could never say all I wanted to. I thought I'd call from Bolivia when you returned."

He leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes wearily, and Marcy saw how deeply etched were the lines on his face. "I never had the chance to put the call through," he ended, his voice curiously empty of emotion.

It took a major effort not to give in to the surge of sympathy that urged Marcy to clasp his head consolingly to her breast.

"Why?" she asked, when the silence grew.

He turned his head on the couch and stared at her, his face devoid of all emotions. "I can't answer that," he said slowly. "I asked you yesterday for your trust. You gave of yourself once with no reservations, and I'm asking for you to do the same once more. The question is . . . can you?"

Marcy examined his expressionless face. Why was she trembling as if he were sending her some important message . . . that her answer would be vital to him . . . to her? It made no sense, and she pulled away from the fanciful notion.

"Are you asking that I should ignore questions that any intelligent person would expect to have answered?" she asked, her voice rising in a disbelieving accusation. "And on that premise you're requesting that I give my trust! For what—an affair along whatever lines you want to conduct it, an affair that promises nothing but more uncertainty in the future. I suppose there'd be other disappearing acts in the future which I wouldn't be allowed to question?"

His eyes remained blank as he stared at her, his only reaction a faint frown.

"Did your job have something to do with the government?" she pressed, infuriated by his silence and determined to find out more information from him. "Were you working for the CIA trying to start a revolution? Or is your work for your company just a cover up for something illegal . . . like dr—"

He moved with unbelievable speed. His eyes blazed as his hand shot out to encircle her throat. "That's enough!" he gritted menacingly. "I've taken people apart for hinting at less than that!"

Marcy licked suddenly dry lips. She had wanted to shake him from his cool reserve, but she should have remembered the hard core she'd always sensed lay just below the surface! She stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. What demon had she unleashed?

A groan vibrated deep in his chest as his clasp gentled into a soft caress. "Don't look at me like that, honey," he murmured contritely, his eyes holding a look of self-disgust. "Don't you know I could never hurt you no matter how angry you might make me?"

He leaned his forehead against hers as his fingers made gentle forays along the bones of her shoulder. "I always avoided women who lacked intelligence, and now I'm asking you to ignore yours and listen only to what your heart tells you. I know how much I'm asking of you, but can't you extend that emotional trust a little further? I promise that as soon as I can tell you, you'll have the full story. Don't you know that I want nothing between us whether it's secrets or . . . clothes?"

Only then did Marcy realize that David had deciphered the riddle of the bow tying her dress. He had pulled it so gently that she hadn't been aware of its opening. The material of her dress slid down of its own weight, exposing the treasure it had so temptingly decorated.

"Ah-h-h." David's long, drawn-out sigh rose in appreciation from his throat. His forehead remained pressed against hers as his large palm lovingly cradled the weight of her firm breast.

She should stop him, she admitted in a dazed enrallment as his long fingers found their target and rolled the rosy tip of her breast into an instant tight bud. There was too much that still had to be resolved, she thought, but by that time he had lowered his dark blond head to her nipple, teasing it with his warm, moist tongue. Somehow Marcy's questions lost their importance.

His hand found and performed its magic on her other breast, and she clasped his head tight to her, reveling in the surging emotions his deep suckling sent through her.

By the time he found the soft flesh of her inner thigh, she was quivering helplessly to each new stroke. Having tasted this intoxication of his lovemaking once before, how could she have ever thought she could deny a further indulgence, she admitted helplessly as he shifted for new territory to conquer.

"Sweet, sweet Marcy," he moaned, as her lips parted under his probing. How could he start this instant fire, she wondered bemusedly, remembering how she had to concentrate for Glen's kisses to even warm her.

As if sensing her momentary wandering, his tongue thrust arrogantly against hers, daring her into a duel that permitted nothing extraneous to intrude. He was demanding full capitulation, and she rose to the challenge with joyful abandonment.

"Dear God, woman, do you know what you do to me?" he groaned, as he crushed her against his chest so that their thundering heartbeats sounded like one.

Her eyes felt so heavy, Marcy found it difficult to focus on his face inches above hers. "Something like you do to me?" she whispered enticingly.

He rose with the joyous laugh of the victor that she was learning to recognize and pulled her to her feet. "There's only one place this will end," he stated triumphantly.

Marcy found herself in the bedroom watching as David pulled back the covers. The room was lit by a faint glow from the lamp in the living room, and she waited with softly panting anticipation for his further seduction. It came swiftly. She'd already lost her sandals by the sofa, and it took but a minute for David to

hook his long fingers simultaneously under the waist of the dress and panty hose and have them stripped from her. He then removed his own clothes, tossing them carelessly aside.

But then the need for speed ceased. As he'd promised before, they had the whole night before them to explore the phenomenon of their attraction. His wonderful sensitive fingers that held so much strength started their investigation at her hands.

The tips of his fingers slid in gentle caresses over her wrists and up her arms, causing ripples of electric excitement to flow in ever-widening circles through her.

When he reached her shoulders, his large hands took over the examination, and her tremors grew as the slight roughness of his calluses intensified her response.

His hands seemed to ask a tender forgiveness as they encircled her throat. Then his thumbs rubbed her lower lip, softening them for later enjoyment. When she placed a kiss on one of his fingers, he accepted her gift and moved on in a slow descent.

Only then did Marcy see that his eyes were closed, and her own lids fluttered down, as she instinctively understood his need to eliminate all outside distraction. It became the most erotic seduction she'd ever experienced.

Her fingertips conducted their own testing along his broad shoulders, moving and lightly probing along the hard muscle there. His response left no doubt in her mind that he was experiencing the same excited

awareness that held her enthralled. She paused momentarily on touching the bandage on his arm, and all her questions returned to her mind. But now was not the time to ask, she knew . . . no, most definitely not the time.

He passed by her breasts, having already given them his full attention, to pause over each slight indentation as he moved over her rib cage. Then his hands dipped lovingly to her narrow waist to pay homage to the womanly flare of her hips.

Marcy caught her breath when he dropped to his knees before her to better explore the sweet curve of her thighs and the calves of her legs. He stopped finally when reaching her ankles, and she quivered in anticipation of his next move.

Her eyelids flew up, and an involuntary gasp of pleasure escaped at the touch of his tongue spreading wet circles around her navel. He rose before her, and she saw that his eyes were now open to observe her reaction as he clasped her hips and drew her close to him.

Her gasp was louder when his hands closed over her buttocks and pulled her forcefully into the cradle of his thighs, giving her full knowledge of his masculine arousal. Flames flickered in his eyes, and she threw her head back to meet his stare so that he could have no doubt that they were both being consumed by the same fire.

"Marcy!" Her name was a groan that rumbled from deep in his chest as he placed her with gentle urgency on the bed.

Had she really forgotten the glory of his weight pressing on her? she mused fleetingly, before his mouth opened to fit over hers and his drugging magic took over. His hands were now more demanding, and there was only time for her to revel in this exquisite torture. He found each sensitive area of her body, as if programmed to her every secret, and when he finally reached the heart of her femininity, her hips arched in eager anticipation.

"Yes, yes, please, David," she begged, her fingers digging ecstatically into his shoulders.

"Soon, sweet love," he moaned huskily. "You're so warm and ready. Open to me, honey, give me of yourself like you did the last time. Give me what I hungered for all those black nights. . . ."

Black nights? The words impinged on the edge of her consciousness. Hadn't he used them before with that same tinge of bleakness? What had really happened in Bolivia, she wondered. As if conscious of her intruding thoughts, he moved to banish them.

His leg pushed urgently between her legs in preparation for the next part of their ritual of love. Immediately her body began to sing. There was room for nothing but to follow the increasing spiral of passion this man had started, to submit to its ever upward pull to its final conclusion.

Her hips arched in explicit supplication, but he anchored them with one large hand. "Don't rush, sweet Marcy," he warned thickly. "I want to prolong this intoxication for us as long as I can." But the tremors running through his body told of the slim hold he had on

his control, and finally, with a groan telling of his capitulation, he released his hold. The passionate union sent exquisite spasms through her that curled her toes and fingers in reflex. The tension of his body told Marcy he was experiencing much the same sensations, and it filled her with a tremendous joy that she could excite him in the same way.

He started the mind-spinning rhythm slowly, letting her adjust to him, until their bodies could no longer be denied and took over command, releasing their passion in a wild ride into the dark star-studded world set aside for lovers.

They returned slowly, wrapped tightly in each other's arms, their damp bodies sealed by their love-act. When their hearts slowed, the magnificent drum-beat giving its joyful acclaim, David raised his head to place a soothing kiss on her lips, which he'd crushed during their final leap into oblivion.

"You're quite special, sweet lady," he murmured, brushing a tangle of hair from her forehead.

"M-m-m," she agreed dreamily. She raised heavy lids to gaze up at him adoringly only to surmise a look of thoughtful reserve that was at such variance with the caressing movements of his hands that it brought her sharply from her languid reverie.

"What's wrong?" she asked impulsively, flushing as memories intruded of her wanton behavior as she'd writhed in response to his explicit caresses.

He gave a heavy sigh. "You haven't forgiven me as yet, have you? You gave of yourself so sweetly. Yet, I could feel you holding back . . ."

Marcy glared at him, incensed by the apparent inadequacy he'd felt in her responses. "What in the world are you talking about?" she demanded, feeling inordinately hurt. She'd been marveling to herself over the way he could carry her to such heights of passion, and here he was intimating that she'd been less than satisfactory! The thought was demoralizing, and she pushed angrily at his shoulders.

"Hey, what gives, love?" he asked in surprise at her reaction. He snaked a hand to capture hers and held them above her head.

"I'm sorry if I don't meet your expectations," she said, feeling bitterly wounded. "I don't know who you're comparing me to, but I'm retreating from the field. You can go back to your perfect lover, but don't expect me to flatter your overactive male ego when she tells you that you don't meet her requirements!"

She couldn't, wouldn't let him see the tears in her eyes, Marcy vowed fiercely, struggling under his weight. Had she really seemed that inadequate to him?

"I don't believe this!" he exclaimed indulgently. "Hush, child, you have it all wrong!" he cajoled, placing one large foot restrainingly over her thrashing legs to effectively anchor them. "Will you behave so that I can talk some sense into you?"

With his weight pressing heavily on her, Marcy was in a no-win situation, but she hurt too much to stop her struggling. David took in her mutinous expression as she tossed her head from side to side. With a grunt of exasperation he grasped her chin firmly and quieted her in the one way that had proved effective. He

fastened his mouth over hers and used his considerable expertise to still her rebellion.

Marcy had no defense against the seduction he performed. She'd thrilled just minutes before to his kisses, and her body was still too intimately conditioned to the melting reflex they produced. Her hurt and anger dissolved into a nothingness.

Damn the man! she groused helplessly as her back arched in an unconscious need to once again feel her breasts pressed hard against his chest.

"That's right, kitten, rub against me," he murmured against her mouth. "I don't want to hear any more nonsense about comparing you with some fictional lover. Haven't you been listening to anything I've been saying? There's no one else . . . and there hasn't been since you first walked through that door and into my life!"

His leg rubbed seductively between her legs, and she barely heard him as increasing waves of desire swept over her. Her world became this marvelous body pressing urgently against her and the heated kisses that reignited the still glowing ashes into a new blazing conflagration. David was the reason for her existence, Marcy admitted as she met his thrust with a joyful abandonment that only he could create. That became all that was important for now. Tomorrow she'd take the time to untangle all the questions . . . all the doubts.

CHAPTER FIVE

Marcy awoke slowly, conscious of the contented happiness that wrapped her in a warm cocoon. The gray-ing sky warned it was time to get up, but her eyes closed rebelliously as she tried to prolong the sweet rapture of feeling David's warm body beside her, of feeling his arm resting protectively across her body.

She examined his face, relaxed in sleep, for a long moment, lovingly memorizing each feature before she reluctantly accepted the pressure of a new day.

Slipping carefully from under his arm, she shivered as the cool air touched her warm body. She gathered her clothes, still lying in a rumpled heap on the floor, and for an exquisite moment, she relived the feverish rapture that had her fingers trembling when the garments had been tossed aside.

Thank goodness their property had the privacy of high hedges, she thought fervently when later hurrying down the grassy edge of the driveway so as not to make noise. And double thanks went to the fact that her mother's converted bedroom wasn't at the back of the house. Was this tinge of guilt how a man felt when

making his way home early in the morning after a liaison, she wondered with wry enlightenment.

Marcy managed to down two cups of strong coffee after her shower before it was time to take the breakfast tray in to her mother. She needed it to face the full day's work ahead of her. While what little sleep she'd enjoyed had been deep, it hadn't come until the early hours. A flush warmed her as she recalled when David had settled her into the curve of his body the last time.

"Be still, wench," he'd warned with a throaty chuckle when she'd wriggled closer in her need to feel him along every inch of her body. "We have to get some sleep if we hope to function tomorrow at work." He'd sounded like a very sleepy, very sated teddy bear, she'd thought with drowsy satisfaction, the knowledge gained from her own similar state.

Her mother, her interest captured by a problem being discussed on a favorite television program, thankfully didn't ask her usual questions about how her evening had gone.

Marcy usually accepted the questions, knowing they weren't meant as an inquisition, but today she felt too vulnerable to try to talk calmly about the man who had taught her the true meaning of passion.

Late that afternoon when driving home from Danielson's department store, Marcy wondered wearily how she could have thought she'd have had time to unravel any of her confusion over her tangled emotions concerning David's reentry into her life.

Unfortunately, the highly volatile window decorator at the department store had given full vent to his

artistic temperament when he discovered that the pink dress selected so carefully weeks before for his color-coordinated window display had been sold by a new salesclerk. As a result she'd spent a hectic afternoon trying to track down a replacement while soothing the excitable artist and calming the teary clerk who was responsible for the sale.

She breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief when she saw David's car was not there. In her present mood she needed a quiet time to try to relax. Her emotions during the past twenty-four hours had been in a constant, unrelenting upheaval. Even knowing that he was in his apartment would have been a strain, wondering when he would make his appearance, knowing that seeing him would send her into a further turmoil.

When she reached her room, Marcy grimaced upon seeing the shadows smudging her eyes, telling of the all too little sleep she'd had the night before.

A long, leisurely bath in a violet-scented tub full of hot water did much to relieve her of some of her tension. But by the time they sat down to their meal, Marcy had to admit ruefully that her senses were straining to identify any sound that might be construed as tires on the driveway indicating that David had returned.

What was keeping him so long, she gritted in irritation, then smiled grimly at herself over her fluctuating impatience. For her peace of mind, she wished him away, but the new part of her that he'd brought to exquisite flower needed to be reassured by his presence.

As it turned out, she didn't hear his arrival after all.

After bringing in the coffee tray, she was involved in fine-tuning a TV selection for her mother when Martha called a warm greeting. "Come in, come in, David. Have you eaten as yet? If not, I'm sure Marcy can get something for you."

David had arrived, and suddenly the room took on brighter colors as Marcy's body surged with new life.

"Thanks, Martha, I've had something," David assured her, "but I'll join you in a cup of coffee, if I may."

There was no reason for her heart to beat so erratically, Marcy reprimanded herself sternly as she turned to the man filling the doorway. When she'd left David at daybreak, his face had been relaxed in deep sleep, a faint smile softening his firm mouth, telling of a lingering satisfaction. Now she saw the lines of weariness were back, and Marcy had to restrain an almost ungovernable urge to reach out to him, to cradle his head against her breast and soothe away the cares of the day.

She was aware that something of what she was feeling must have telegraphed to him. His eyes darkened as they captured hers, and Marcy stood for several pounding heartbeats under the hungry message they were giving.

"I'll get another cup," she managed to say in spite of a suddenly dry mouth.

He stepped aside politely, giving her barely enough room so that her shoulder brushed his chest as she passed. "Good evening, Marcy. You look like you had a difficult day," he said, the mischievous glint in his eyes belying the polite greeting.

"And you, too," she returned before hurrying to the kitchen. The rat! He'd seen the shadows circling her eyes and knew she'd known the cause of his own tiredness. It wasn't her fault that they'd had so little sleep the night before! She paused as she reached for the cup, distressed how her sensory points seemed to swell with the invading memories.

"Martha sent me to tell you to bring the chocolate cake that her friend brought today," David said, as he entered the kitchen. "It seems she thinks I need a little fattening."

"You do," Marcy agreed, as she waited with fascinated attention as he came slowly across the intervening space to stop inches from her. Her eyes were devouring his face, but she couldn't stop the examination as she recalled how her lips had kissed its every plane the night before.

"I won't be held accountable if you keep looking at me like that!" he groaned. She was pulled with tender roughness into his arms and her head cradled on his shoulder. He rocked her gently, his hands moving in long sweeping caresses as if needing to perform this ritual to assuage his senses with the feel of her.

"Ah, Marcy, Marcy, it's been so long," he said into her hair. "A day is too long to go without holding you in my arms. How could you have left so early this morning?"

Marcy wriggled closer as lightning darts of pleasure followed the path of his hands. She shifted her head so that her lips could explore the portion of his neck exposed by his collar. "It was pure self-defense," she

teased. "I noticed this habit you have each time you awaken of performing seductive acts upon my person, and as you kept reminding me, we did have to get some rest!" The tip of her tongue took exploratory licks, delighting her with the faintly salty taste of him.

A shudder ran through him as his breath exploded from his chest. "Marcy!" he warned, but his hands had already curled over her rounded derriere, and she was pulled against the hard thrust of his thighs. The intimate contact had Marcy clinging to him in wonder as every fiber of her being seemed to dissolve. Her head fell back, feeling too heavy to hold. The last thing she saw before her lashes fluttered down was his lips parting in his small smile of anticipation that for some unknown reason always made her capitulation more thrilling.

She was crushed tight against his chest as his lips took possession of hers. It became difficult to breathe but the delirious sensations swamping her left her uncaring. Smothering was not a bad way to go, she admitted dizzily.

David shifted slightly, moving her against the cabinets, and it was the harsh pressure across her back that forced a return of coherent thought. "The chocolate cake!" she exclaimed, tearing her lips from his possession.

He looked at her blankly as if she'd lost her mind. Then the incongruity of the subject being thrust into the passionate exchange caused a chuckle to well up in his chest.

He gave a rueful shake of his head. "Why do I have

this feeling that I'm slipping badly? It's very demoralizing to discover that anticipation over a chocolate cake can take precedence over one of my kisses."

"It's known as self-preservation," Marcy returned smartly. "I had a distinct feeling that my virtue was being attacked, and who was going to explain to my mother why it was taking so long to collect an extra cup and saucer?"

"Not to say a chocolate cake," he added darkly. "And to think I'm not particularly fond of it."

The passion that had blinded them to time and place was safely harnessed, Marcy saw with regretful acceptance as they returned to the living room. She gave a suppressed sigh of relief upon seeing that her mother appeared engrossed in the program she'd been watching and apparently hadn't noticed the inordinately long time they'd spent in the kitchen.

Later, when David helped her wash the dishes, Marcy caught him in a yawn. "Are they keeping you busy in the office?" she asked indulgently.

"There's always a backlog that needs attending to when I've been away for any length of time," he admitted, rubbing his arm absently before dragging a towel around a pot.

The action snagged her attention, but Marcy successfully stilled the questions that she wanted to ask. Not tonight, she concluded wisely. Not tonight when they were both so tired. Although she freely admitted to loving him, any evasion on his part could easily lead to words that would be difficult to retract.

But her decision didn't keep her from feeling un-

easy. Apprehension invaded her mind again, colored by her resentment over knowing that David would tell her nothing about his life once he'd left Montclair.

Marcy concentrated her frustration on scrubbing the last pan, using the action as a means to dull her annoyance. David was a proud man and wouldn't tolerate any pressure she might try to apply. But she had her pride also. Did she always have to do the giving? Wasn't it about time someone gave something to her? What possibly could have occurred in Bolivia that had him clamming up so mysteriously?

She looked up startled as David pulled the pan from her hand and dried it with an expert flourish. "Whatever is making you scowl like that won't be fixed by scrubbing a hole in this," he said with amused tolerance.

He was right, Marcy conceded as he bent to place the utensil in the lower cabinet. She inhaled deeply to chase away the growing tension. "You'd better be careful," she quipped a few minutes later, when he returned from putting out the garbage. "Some woman will be snapping you up when she sees you're so nicely housebroken."

His large hand snared her expertly as she walked past him. "Care to apply for the job?" he challenged softly.

Her heart leaped before she ordered it sternly to behave. "Hah! I've more sense. I only consider applicants who guarantee to take the garbage out on a daily basis."

She felt his slight tensing. "Is that so important?" he

asked somberly.

Marcy met his gaze unswervingly. She hadn't meant the conversation to take this serious turn, but she didn't back away.

"Yes," she whispered earnestly. "As my mother ever so subtly keeps reminding me, time is passing. I'm not getting any younger, and her dearest wish is to have some grandchildren. I admit I'd love to comply, but I wouldn't think of having any unless they had a secure family life. And that means that they have a father reasonably in attendance so they could turn to him whenever they needed him."

His eyes darkened broodingly. "If that's the only kind of marriage you'd consider, you know I don't fill your requirements. But what do we do about what happens, like now, when we're together and we both know there's no way we can deny how we feel?"

Marcy collapsed against him in defeat. That was the crux of the problem. No matter how she tried to deny it, incapacitating warmth spread through her with a sweeping force every time he touched her. "Oh, David!" she cried in helpless frustration.

"Yes, sweet love," he whispered with understanding, and gathered her close for a kiss. "You'll be coming to me later?" he murmured, kissing her flushed cheek while caressing her silken hair.

"But you're tired," she protested tentatively.

She felt the masculine smile as his lips pressed the curve of her throat. "We both are. But I have the feeling that once in bed, I'll find sleep hard to come by without you by my side."

Marcy smiled with satisfaction over knowing her lover was as caught in the web as she was. "I'll come," she promised. "But I have some things I have to go over with my mother first." It was the end of the month, and they always discussed the bills before paying them.

He gently smoothed the hair from her face. "Don't keep me waiting too long," he breathed against her lips, before taking them once again.

He brushed a finger against her mouth, and with a hundred unspoken promises in his eyes, he went out the door.

"I feel so much better when David is around," her mother confessed, when Marcy settled at the small desk and retrieved the checkbook from the drawer. "It's silly, I know, but he's a very reassuring person. He reminds me in some ways of your father, dear. He's a man a woman can lean on, knowing she's secure in his hands."

Marcy shot a cautious look at her mother's serene face. Did she guess at the love that had taken such a strong hold on her, or was she merely up to her not-so-subtle tricks of enumerating the good points of any eligible man whom Marcy came in contact with.

She couldn't resist telling about the other side of the coin. "You may be right, but a wise woman would see that because of the type of work he does, those times she could enjoy any of that leaning would be few and far between. He'd be a dangerous man to fall in love with."

Her mother looked at her sharply, and Marcy wondered if her voice had betrayed some of her private

turmoil. The painful part was that it was all too true. The normal evolution of two people caught up in the powerful attraction that brought them together would be marriage, and she'd dearly love to be David's wife. Instead, they were trapped in a no-win situation. She couldn't even offer to give up her job and follow him. He very obviously didn't want any such encumbrances. Besides, she didn't want to give up her job. She'd worked hard to reach her present position and wasn't about to leave it, especially now with the rumor that the head buyer for the store was thinking of taking an offer from a larger chain. She'd be a fool to jeopardize her position knowing her chances for that promotion were excellent.

Also, she admitted to being a homebody. Roots were essential for her well-being. There was no pressure to live with her mother, but she liked the convenience it offered. She loved the large rooms with their eclectic combination of antique and comfortable modern furniture, and the garden was a constant source of joy. Apartment living would deny her those pleasures.

Yet, balanced against what she was experiencing with David, everything else seemed to lose importance. However, she was wise enough to recognize that the overwhelming passion they shared by the very nature of its intensity could burn itself out. The day could come when she would resent giving up what was important to her. Would their love survive under that stress?

She opened the checkbook and put her attention to the first bill. This inner searching was all academic.

David had said nothing about love. And he very definitely had denied the possibility of marriage. All he offered was a sharing of an affair, and considering the power of the emotions generated between them, she had no alternative but to accept that. Incomplete as it was, it was the only solution.

With that acceptance she put her ambivalent feelings to rest. As long as David was here, she was his. The tomorrows would have to take care of themselves. She quickly finished the bills. David was waiting, and she wanted to be with him.

She slipped into a flowing caftan, deciding it was the easiest outfit to wear. She was learning a reluctant lesson. When returning in the morning with time at a premium, it would be the simplest thing to get out of in the mad dash to prepare for work. Would she ever be able to casually accept the trip between his apartment and the house, she wondered as she mounted the stairs.

The only light glowing was in David's bedroom, and she gazed down at him ruefully when she reached the doorway. So much for hurrying... he'd fallen asleep after all! The sheet was draped casually to his waist, exposing the expanse of his chest and outflung arms to her ravenous gaze.

One eye opened to stare drowsily at her. "I've been waiting for forty-eight minutes," he stated accusingly. "Don't waste time standing there!"

The corner of the sheet was lifted invitingly, and Marcy gave a little cry of delight as she quickly divested herself of the caftan and slipped in the bed beside

him. So the wait had seemed interminable to him also!

He gathered her close, and his hand made a reassuring sweep over her before settling over her breast. "Now I can go to sleep," he sighed contentedly, breathing a soft kiss into her ear.

Her mouth opened in surprised disbelief, but before she could utter a word, she realized that she was suddenly very relaxed and drowsy. She *was* tired and she *did* feel wonderfully comfortable with his warm body cushioning hers! It was as if she'd come home after a long day of frustration. Her even breathing soon matched his as she slipped into sleep.

She awoke slowly, conscious of delicious sensations rippling through her at the same time that she became aware of the warm, moist mouth curling with teasing attention over the rosebud tip of her breast.

Her hands glided over the smooth skin of his shoulders to bury in his thick mane of hair. In acknowledgment of her awakening, his teeth settled gently over the raised nub to further tease it. Her knees slowly drew up in response to the sweet torture.

A moan escaped her as she pulled his head closer. He suckled deeply as his hands looked for other areas on her quivering body to further perform his magic on.

Her lower body moved in thrashing delight until he placed a leg heavily over her legs to still their movement. Her hands moved in heated surveys over the muscles banding his rib cage until he grasped one, and shifting slightly, urged her lower to perform her own magic.

This was time beyond all reason. There was no be-

ginning or end, just now. There was only this delirious moment that was theirs. Passion in ever-increasing mountainous waves of rapture coursed through them until their joining became a necessity. Tremors ran through him with increasing force until his leg parted her legs and he rose above her. With a groan that told of his spiraling desire, he fastened his mouth over hers, making every part of her tremble with ardor. Her hands clutched at his heated, sweatslicked body as she opened to him, eager, demanding his possession.

He paused after filling her, willing that they savor every wonderful moment to its utmost. His strokes were a slow, sensuous torture she wanted never to end, but their bodies, panting under the pressure of spiraling desire, tricked them into increasing the tempo until the final mountainous wave caught them up to carry them with tidal force and toss them to the waiting beach.

"David!" she moaned, the word a dazed accolade to the bliss he'd opened to her.

"Yes, my love," he answered, shifting his weight before aligning her soft curves against him. "Now, I believe we can get that sleep," he teased with a soft chuckle.

CHAPTER SIX

"Isn't tonight when the shower is being given for that charming salesclerk?" Martha alerted her daughter, as she came to kiss her before leaving for work.

Marcy paused in consternation. Not tonight! she thought in silent dismay. When she'd agreed to attend, she'd thought it would fill another empty night. But now David was back, and she was distressed at the thought of missing even one evening with him. Yet, he hadn't said anything about seeing her. . . . Would he be working late? She swallowed her sigh of resignation. Office politics made it imperative that she at least make an appearance.

Lori's sunny disposition made her popular throughout the department store, and Marcy found that a room at the restaurant had been hired for the occasion. She also discovered that her hope of leaving the party early had to be abandoned. Since she was in charge in Lori's section, she found herself seated at a prominent table.

Everyone had donated to the kitty, and when gift unwrapping time came, proper acclaim went to the expensive and comprehensive set of stainless flatware

which the happy bride-to-be received. The filmy, pale ivory nightgown and peignoir that Marcy had selected when approached by the buying committee met with sighs of approval. It was the stuff that dreams were made of.

Marcy was unprepared for the stab of longing that made her catch her breath. Would she ever have the opportunity to wear a similar diaphanous gown on her honeymoon? With the touch of David's body so fresh in her memory she could imagine in arousing detail how his eyes would glitter if he saw her in the sheer outfit.

She took a hurried sip of wine, forcing her attention back to the party. She should know better than to fantasize over the impossible. David had been honest about his position on the subject of marriage.

A burst of raucous laughter erupted when Lori unwrapped the last present. Some wag had presented her with a box of disposable diapers and utilitarian baby bibs. Laughing, but with cheeks flaming, Lori read aloud the accompanying card warning her of the dire results of too much moonlight and too many roses.

They all knew how Lori was looking forward to starting a family, and as she watched, the uncomfortable longing in Marcy grew into a dull ache. What had happened to her own dreams of a husband and children? She had long ago set them aside to be replaced by the intensity of her desire to have a challenging and satisfying career.

She'd reached her goal. . . . Now what? With rumors that Debra Simons was moving on, she could try for

head buyer. It was the next logical step. But was that the route she wished to travel? It would mean extensive traveling to conventions and private showings in order to find the best buys for the various departments.

Her mother would be the first to encourage her if she wanted to make the move, Marcy admitted to herself, but she'd worry about leaving her for any extended time. She could manage well enough when her arthritic condition was in remission, but they never knew when there'd be a flare-up that would confine her to bed.

"Anyone want to bet that Lori'll be taking maternity leave in nine months?" Natalie, the head of the special imported gift section, muttered cynically.

Marcy looked at the twice-divorced woman and was surprised to see her bitter expression as she raised her wineglass, draining it in a long gulp. Natalie's stories of her weekends at the singles bars and the fast crowd she traveled with made for titillating gossip. But now, for one revealing moment, the inner loneliness, the disillusionment over dreams lost were poignantly exposed. For the first time Marcy had a disquieting insight behind the brittle facade Natalie kept firmly in place.

Had Natalie once also held dreams of a loving husband and children? A cold finger touched Marcy's spine as if in warning. How many of these showers had she attended, she wondered, with an uncomfortable awareness of time slipping by. Would there ever be one for her?

Her thoughts went automatically to David, and she

wincing inwardly in defeat. He was the man she wanted as her husband, as the father of her children, she admitted with a terrifying certainty. But it could never be, she firmly told herself.

She shifted restlessly in her seat as her reflections moved inexorably to their logical conclusion. How many years would it be before her own expression would reveal to someone the same loneliness and disillusionment that she'd just seen in Natalie?

As soon as the party showed signs of breaking up, Marcy made a quick exit, knowing that she was running from the disturbing thoughts that had spoiled the evening.

She inched her car from the parking lot, thinking of David. Were her thoughts ever far from him? she groaned in dismay. Had he returned home early, anticipating a long evening with her? A sudden urgency gripped her. What was she doing wasting time here when every part of her longed to be with him? His job allowed them only small amounts of time together; how could she have let this evening slip away? Suddenly every second they could share became doubly precious because she had no way of knowing if he'd be gone tomorrow.

"David was here asking for you," her mother said with a gentle questioning look, after Marcy gave a quick resume of her evening. "He seemed disappointed when I told him you were out. He'd come home early, so I invited him to dinner with me." She gave a delighted laugh. "I instructed him on how to make baking powder biscuits to stretch

the stew you left, and we had a charming time."

Marcy blinked, unable to envision David actually cooking something for dinner. "I'm glad you had company," she said, hiding her disappointment as she bent to place a kiss on the soft cheek.

"He did say something about taking you to dinner tomorrow," Martha persisted. "Why don't you call him? He left only a half hour ago, so he should still be awake."

"I'll see," Marcy said noncommittally. But when she reached her room, she hurried to her bedroom window to see if the lights were still on in the carriage house.

They were, and as her hand hovered over the phone, she was overcome with an intense longing to hear his voice. But suddenly that wasn't enough. She'd left him at daybreak while he was still asleep. Her overwhelming need to see him drove her on silent feet out of the back door and across the lawn.

Sanity returned after she rapped once on his door, but by that time it was too late. She heard his steps cross the living room floor, and the door swung open, bathing her in a rectangle of light.

"Marcy!" he said with supreme satisfaction. "I'll never deny the power of ESP again. Ever since I heard your car, I've been willing you to come."

He'd evidently been readying for bed. His shirt hung open, and Marcy drank in the powerful lines of his body, accented by the back light. Would it always be like this? she wondered with a fatalistic acceptance, as even with the distance separating them, every part

of her seemed to jump into magnetic alignment with him. Was he driven by this same relentless desire to see if the match could be as perfect as it had been before?

His arms opening to her was her answer, and as they closed around her, she had the wonderful sensation of arriving home after a long voyage. He gently settled her in the cradle of his thighs and then wrapped a hand tenderly around the nape of her neck to position her for his kiss.

He tasted faintly of minty toothpaste and wine, and she thought the combination ambrosial. He hadn't showered as yet, and she inhaled deeply of the musky male scent that was uniquely his. Her hands moved lovingly through the thickness of his hair as her mouth moved under his, telling that her hunger equaled his. It had been so long . . . so long.

"How could you have left me this morning without a word?" he groaned, nipping her earlobe, warning that retaliation would be more severe in the future if she did it again.

"But you were so explicit that you needed your sleep," she protested archly.

He raised his head to look down at her. A leering smirk curved his wide mouth. "Give me a minute, and I'll show you explicitly what I need," he murmured seductively, palming her waist and forcing her close into full awareness of the extent of his arousal.

Marcy couldn't still her hips from rubbing their response, but her eyes remained beguilingly innocent as she met his. She became fascinated by the flame burn-

ing in their dark depths.

"I came because Martha said you were interested in a dinner date," she murmured with mischievous guilelessness. "Perhaps phoning would have been more proper."

"And I guess you think you're being proper right now?" he murmured warningly, as he moved his hips in a reciprocal enticement.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders for support as long shuddering waves of desire swept through her. What were they doing teasing each other like this?

Her head seemed too heavy to hold, and it dropped back, exposing the warm curve of her throat. "I'll be home from work by six," she managed to announce distractedly.

"Mmm?" he asked, not pausing in his licking exploration of the sweet offering. "What are you talking about?"

What *had* she been saying, she wondered dazedly as she rotated her head for his further delight. It was rapidly becoming impossible to think coherently.

"Come, Marcy," he whispered hoarsely, capturing her mouth in a drugging kiss that emptied her mind of everything but her desire for him.

In a moment she found herself by his bed, and he began to slowly remove her dress. She stepped gracefully from its slithering folds, then removed her own lacy undergarments, vibrantly aware of his reverent appreciation as she performed the seductive striptease for his pleasure.

And pleasure was what she wanted to give David,

she realized with an intense desire . . . in every form and description that she could imagine. "No, let me," she demanded, pushing his hands aside when he started to remove his shirt.

This was the man she loved. She might never have the opportunity to tell him those words—he might never want to hear them—but she was driven by an ungovernable need to give expression to her feeling. She began her loving seduction, telling him in her every action what he meant to her.

She placed small moist kisses along his wide shoulders as she inched his shirt away. When it fell to the floor, the pads of her fingers ran tiny love pats across the broad expanse of his chest as she breathed fairy kisses in the light furring between his nipples. She found one nipple and flicked it with the tip of her tongue, bringing it to a hard nub.

Marcy was thrillingly aware of the increased cadence of his breathing and the faint hissing sound it made. His hands reached convulsively for her when she touched his belt buckle, but she shook her head warningly that she wasn't ready to relinquish her seduction.

He then clenched his hands into fists, and they fell to his side, telling of the tight hold he was forcing on himself not to take command. The knowledge added a new dimension to her performance. He could easily drive her beyond reason. Was it possible that she could do the same to him?

She unbuckled the belt, easing the restriction, and

inserted her hands under the material to stroke him around his waist. The muscles banding his abdomen quivered in heightened awareness at each passage, and only then was Marcy aware of her own rapid breathing. She knew then that her own clamoring desire would soon force her to terminate the teasing performance.

"Are you enjoying driving me out of my mind, my sweet witch?" David groaned huskily. "I'm warning you, in a few seconds you're going to pay for every minute of torture!"

"Oh, David!" she sighed, collapsing against him in full capitulation. Her breasts brushed against his chest to ease their ache, causing a violent shudder to course through his powerful frame. Suddenly Marcy was tipped swiftly back on the bed.

"Now it's my turn," he exalted darkly, as he quickly removed his remaining clothes and settled heavily over her. But she had done her seduction too well, and he moved quickly to take her. They rode the tornado to its whirling finish to lie gasping at its end, exhausted by the fury of the storm they'd created.

They lay drowsily entwined, satisfied and contented in the deepest sense known to man and woman. David shifted his weight slightly so that she could breathe easily, but Marcy stilled his move from the warm nest of her silken thighs. Having touched heaven, she wished to prolong the physical memory of that excruciatingly beautiful ascent as long as possible.

Her finger trailed lightly over his shoulder until it

brushed the bandage on his arm. It was smaller this time, merely a large-sized adhesive plaster, but it worried her.

"Is it mending well?" she asked anxiously. Gone was her resentment of his evasions over the cause of the injury. For a brief moment they'd been as one and she found that his pain had become hers and she willed the wound to heal quickly.

"Mmm," he answered drowsily, as he bent his arm to cup her breast. His thumb moved in lazy circles over the rosy peak that responded immediately. "The sutures were removed, so it doesn't pull like it did."

His head was nestled by her neck, and she brushed a kiss across his forehead. "That's good. I saw how it bothered you."

They were silent for long minutes while she became more aware of the warm response building in her as he continued his playful attention to her swelling breast. Her gentle strokes along the long column of his spine took on more meaning, and then her fingers began to follow the strong bands of muscles across his back, kneading and stroking with more insistence.

"You never did tell me if we're to have a dinner date tomorrow," she murmured, and wondered if he'd heard the tremor in her voice. How could he instigate this feverish response so soon?

He shifted slightly, and she could feel the smile on his lips as he kissed her shoulder.

"Thinking of food, love? Give me a minute, and I'll be happy to feed you." He leered teasingly before running little nips over the soft mound under his hand

until his mouth opened to take the hardened peak.

He pressed his hips against her moist nest, and she gasped her awareness of his renewed arousal. They moved with leisurely grace, each giving to the other until once again they cried out in wild, soaring ecstasy.

"Before I get sidetracked again . . . about that date tomorrow night," David said later with a lazy chuckle that told of his deep contentment. "Can you be ready around seven o'clock?"

"You had me worried for a minute," Marcy answered with a laugh. "I was beginning to feel that you were trying to avoid feeding me!"

"You have to excuse these distractions," he murmured, as he cupped his large, warm hand possessively over her breast. "I have this charming and very beguiling witch who insists on crawling into bed with me to perform magic rites upon my helpless body. It makes coherent conversation a bit difficult."

Their laughter was muffled in a final kiss until, with a contented wriggle that brought her closer to him, they slid into an obliterating sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marcy brushed sleepily at something feathering annoyingly along her jawline, then awoke, startled at the thought of an insect crawling there. She met dark eyes shining with amusement as David's finger continued its light trail.

"Sorry to awaken you, sweet, but it's time to get up," he murmured, his hand splaying gently around her throat before moving on to caress her shoulder with sensuous strokes.

"It can't be," Marcy protested, as she snuggled contentedly under the blanket. "You'll have to call in and tell them I have this dreaded disease and can't make it today."

She raised sleep-drenched eyes and smiled enticingly. "In return, I'll call your office and tell them the same thing."

"And what is the name of that dreaded disease?" he asked quizzically. His hand had found the pink crest of the soft mound, and his interest became diverted.

She grinned mischievously. "Lackasleepum. It happens when two people forget that sleeping is the pri-

mary use of a bed. And if you don't stop what you're doing, you'll be proving my point."

"I'm doing my private scientific investigation into the symptoms," he murmured thickly, as his mouth found the tempting morsel rising under his adept fingering. "You don't want me to report on the wrong disease."

Her body shook in response to his caress, and it took considerable effort for Marcy to maintain her control. Cupping his cheeks, she pushed him away with reluctant determination. "Don't do this to me," she begged in a ragged whisper. "We don't have time. Besides, my mother will be wanting her breakfast."

David flung himself on his back, the deep movement of his chest telling of his inner fight for control. He finally turned his head, his lowered lids hiding the expression in his eyes as he looked at her over the high angle of his cheekbones. "What about my wants?" he asked. "What if I say I'd like you to stay here to share breakfast with me?"

Marcy stared at him in surprise. Did he want her to move in as a live-in mistress? Surely he must know that under the present set-up that would be impossible. How could she ever explain it to her mother? The knowledge swept over her then that loving him the way she did, she'd be tempted to accept that tenuous position if that was what he wanted, though it was less than what she longed for... far less than what she dreamed of.

She rolled from the bed and hurriedly gathered her clothes, all too aware of dark eyes intently watching

every movement. "I'm afraid then that you'll have to get up, lazybones," she said with forced brightness. "Give me a half hour to take a quick shower and get things started. Martha will be pleased to have her star boarder share breakfast with us."

His hand snaked out to catch her wrist as she bent to recover a shoe, and she gasped in surprise when he jerked her across his broad chest.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it!" he grunted brusquely, as he shifted her into a better position so they faced each other.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, trying to keep in abeyance the forlorn hope brought on by his action.

A frown brought his brows together, and he seemed momentarily disconcerted, probing her clear gray eyes as if searching for an answer.

He released her abruptly and helped her sit up. "I won't be able to accept that invitation today," he said, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. "I'm running late already."

Marcy dashed into the bathroom and dressed quickly, hiding her confusion over his sudden withdrawal. Had he spoken without thinking and was now afraid she might put more into his words than he meant? He needn't worry! To be his live-in mistress was far from what she wanted from him unless it included the position of wife . . . and mother . . . and housekeeper . . . and gardener.

For him, she would make the list endless, and she blinked against the moisture filming her eyes. Damn

men who used women for their own gratification, she stormed inwardly, then immediately withdrew her accusation. Under the expertise of his passionate teaching, she'd received ten times whatever she'd been able to give him.

After she dressed, Marcy reentered the bedroom. She stared irresolutely at his broad back now covered in a short terry bathrobe. A few hours ago she'd lovingly explored that magnificent body it covered, but now the thin white material of the bathrobe seemed an impenetrable barrier. She met David's gaze in the mirror hanging over his dresser, and her bewilderment increased. His expression was unreadable; she had no idea what he was thinking. After the frivolous banter they'd enjoyed, his retreat was doubly difficult to understand.

"I'll see you around seven," she stated shortly, and left the room, her stiffly held shoulders acting as a shield against the pain she felt. Even after the love they had shared, he evidently didn't think she rated a good-bye kiss.

"Marcy . . . wait!"

She paused on the stair landing to look over her shoulder, her eyes a cloudy gray showing her hurt . . . her confusion. He stood in the bedroom doorway, the rumpled state of the bed behind him an explicit reminder of the night they'd just spent in each other's arms. What in heaven's name had gone wrong?

His frown was back, and he shifted his shoulders in an irresolute gesture. "Yes, seven. We've some things we have to talk about."

She sensed they weren't the words he originally meant to say but she nodded briefly, and wondering what he had really wanted to tell her, she hurried down the stairs. When reaching the bottom, the answer hit her. He had to leave again and hadn't wanted to spoil their last night by telling her beforehand! The thought of another long separation tore at her. She wasn't sure she could stand to be without him again.

Somehow she managed to function at work, though her mind was in a whirl of confusion. "Loving a man shouldn't be this painful," she muttered angrily, when the seemingly interminable day was finally over and she was driving home. But loving the wrong man was, she admitted, as she jammed on the brake when she reached a red light. Was this what her life was going to be—riding the highs for the short periods when David was in town, only to drown in the lows during the endless months that he was gone? Could any love, no matter how powerful, last under such a constant strain? Her heart cried yes. But as she remembered the gray days and black nights she'd just lived through, she knew the sad truth.

A horn blasted behind her, alerting her to a change in the traffic light, and her car jerked into gear. She loved David to distraction, but how could she survive frequent separations from him? If she accepted an affair with him during the time he was back, what would happen to her dream for a husband and children, a home of her own? She knew as long as she allowed herself to taste the heaven she'd discovered when in David's arms, her heart would be closed to the possi-

bility of loving another man. His hold on her emotions was complete.

David said there were things they had to talk about tonight. Would she be strong enough to take a stand for what she wanted out of life, knowing the limitations set by loving him? Would she be able to deny him, to block him out of her life and continue the healing that had finally started just before he'd returned?

Healing? The word made her smile bitterly. She'd merely succeeded in blanketing the aching longing, in muffling the pain. He had only to return, and the covering had been immediately stripped away, proving that her emotions were just as raw, her desire just as easily set aflame as the last time she'd seen him.

Marcy found herself dressed a full half hour before David was due. Poor planning, she thought as she wandered aimlessly through her bedroom and sitting room suite. She was too nervous to sit with her mother, afraid Martha would notice something amiss. How would the evening end? she agonized. Would she be lured back to his apartment, helpless under his spell, or would she have the strength to end what was rapidly becoming a soul-wrenching situation?

Stopping by her dresser, she absentmindedly fluffed the bang that fell softly over her forehead. Just what *did* David mean by saying they had a lot to talk over? They'd had such a happy nonsensical exchange before that. Was his sudden mood change caused by nothing deeper than being tired? Maybe he was the type of man who presented a grouchy front until he had his morning coffee. The thought drove home with

startling clarity how little she really knew about the man she loved. Had her day of unresolved turmoil been instigated by nothing more than his lack of a cup of coffee?

The idea appeared ludicrous, and she smiled grimly. She no doubt had completely misinterpreted the whole incident . . . had blown it all out of proportion. As a result of her tenseness that day, she'd managed to alienate most of her co-workers. Tomorrow she'd have a lot of ruffled feathers to smooth. How could she have let one man tear such gaps in the cool competency that was her trademark at work?

David's knock sounded on the back door, and Marcy drew in a controlling breath and forced herself to smile. She was glad she had. He never looked more stirringly devastating. The deep gray, almost black suit magnified the strong, lean form it covered. His hair was still dark from his recent shower, and his spicy after-shave reached out to tease her senses reminding her of the night before when her face, her body had been stimulated by the slight sandpaper rasping from his jaw.

Her nerve endings rippled with memories. Something of what she was experiencing must have shown. His gaze was dark as his finger brushed the smooth outline of her cheek.

"If you keep looking at me like that, your lipstick is going to be smudged over both of us," he murmured huskily, as a rueful smile tugged on the corners of his mouth. "Be a good girl and get your jacket, or whatever, while I say hello to Martha. I called for a reser-

vation at Marlboro Inn. We'll have to hurry to make the only one they had available."

They drove in silence past the handsome estates on Upper Mountain Avenue to the turnoff on Watchung Avenue until they arrived at Grove, where the old Tudor-type building stood.

The meal was superb, but if David remembered his declaration that they had to talk, he gave no sign of it. Lulled as much by the light wine that complemented the delicately seasoned food as by his humorous anecdotes, Marcy was willing to let her mind drift in pleasant relaxation. After the turbulence she'd felt for the past few days, it was a welcome respite.

Although she tried to deny it, Marcy realized that this pause was just that, a respite, and that by the time the evening was over, a major confrontation might have to be faced. For under the charm David was projecting, Marcy sensed a forbearance, a tenseness. She knew there were things waiting to be said.

Her attention was diverted by a young couple being seated nearby. An infant was held lovingly in the husband's arms. Immediately Marcy was swept with the same sense of longing that had filled her at Lori's shower the evening before.

When a tiny chubby hand reached up, the father kissed it, and the soft look that glowed in the young mother's face was reflected for a poignant second on Marcy's.

David paused in what he was saying as if disconcerted by her expression. After a thoughtful inspection of the young couple, he continued with his discourse.

Her relaxed state remained as they left the restaurant. David's large hand cupped her elbow with possessive determination, as if he was afraid she might veer away to a different car.

"We'll go to my apartment," he said, as he inserted the key in the ignition. "I bought a special Napoleon brandy that I think you'll like."

The car purred out of the parking lot and paused before entering the stream of traffic. David reached for her hand and held it in warm captivity against his thigh as his glance went appreciatively over the silk hyacinth-blue sheath that was a perfect complement to her wheat-blond hair and gave new color to her light gray eyes.

"Have I told you how lovely you look tonight?" he said, as his thumb carved silent messages along her palm.

Marcy answered his warm look with a dreamy smile, aware that the atmosphere in the car had changed subtly, enclosing them in a private world. Just like that, she mused with renewed wonder, he could, with a touch and a few words, make her vibrate to him alone.

She was discovering love was a glory and an agony, but for now she was content to revel in the glory of it. Sitting so close that her senses were delirious with the scent of him, she absorbed the wonder of the man as her hand tingled from his touch. Even the sensuous softness of his jacket rubbing her arm became a seduction in itself.

Whatever David had in mind, she suspected she

was past denying it.

By the time he turned on the light in the apartment, her mouth was a soft promise that thirsted for his kisses, her body a long ache that cried out for his touch.

This was the magic that was David, and she was helpless under its spell. Seeing the beginning flickering fires glowing deep in his eyes, she leaned toward him, lips waiting, eager to be consumed by his flames.

His lips were firm yet gentle as they moved over hers. He hadn't positioned her against his thighs as was his habit, and she arched toward him, seeking that sweet contact that had become so necessary.

He wrenched his mouth from hers with a groan that matched the one that whispered from her throat. "Sweet witch," he breathed in a raspy exhalation, as he pushed her gently away from him. "You're such an exquisite firebrand in my arms." His hands dropped their hold on her as if she had indeed scorched them. "I'd better see to that brandy or it won't get opened."

"Who needs brandy?" she teased with pouting seduction, as she moved to curl her arms around his neck.

"Don't make it difficult, Marcy," he warned, capturing her wrists and urging her to the sofa, showing her he intended to stay in control of the evening. He tossed his jacket and tie on a chair before turning to the small kitchenette.

She accepted the bowled goblet and cupped it in her hands to warm the contents. Why couldn't he have let things go as they were, she thought with rising rebellion, then realized that the rebellion wasn't against

David but the creeping anxiety over what the next hour would bring. She'd seen the firming of his jaw and knew the awaited discussion time was now, and suddenly she wanted to back away.

Raising the goblet, she inhaled the rich aroma before taking a sip. The mellow bite of the liquor flowed down her throat, leaving a pleasant, reassuring trail of heat.

"Excellent," she pronounced, taking another appreciative sip. She had a feeling she'd soon need its fortifying properties. David took the seat beside her, and Marcy was startled to see the surprising uncertainty on his face as he sampled the brandy.

"Catching up on the backlog on your desk?" she ventured nervously into the silence.

"The end is in sight," he admitted.

"Will you be leaving soon on another job?" The question was forced from her throat. How long would she have to live with her loneliness this time?

"Not that I know of, but then I never know when something comes up that needs immediate attention."

Marcy's fingers tightened around the glass. Nothing had changed. What had she expected? When his job called, he'd leave without a backward glance.

"You enjoy your work, don't you?" she asked bleakly, before draining her glass.

"It's challenging," he admitted. "And an added bonus is that it pays top dollars."

Then, as if deciding that he didn't, after all, want to talk, he placed his glass on the coffee table and reached for hers. "Enough about my job. I have this

delightful witch sitting beside me who's adept at casting spells, and I have a driving need to see if I can weave one of my own."

Caught unaware by his sudden movement, Marcy found herself lying across his thighs. He cradled her in his arms, and his gentle assault started with warm moist kisses on her forehead, her eyes, her ears. Her head fell back over his arm under his nudging as he kissed the slender curve of her throat.

A warm ache grew in her, and she cupped his face, bringing his mouth to hers. She drank her fill of this man, this marvelous person who was the only one who could elicit such instantaneous response from her, the only one who could send shimmering sparks through her.

"You weave a mighty powerful spell, my warlock," she whispered, when they had to pause. She thrilled to the erotic thunder of their hearts beating as one. Under her hands his skin was scorched with the same fever that flushed hers.

"It's only like this with you," he admitted hoarsely, the fire lighting his eyes sending the flames higher in her. He leaned against the sofa, exposing her back for his exploring hands. He found the zipper, and she turned slightly, aiding its parting glide.

"They're an improvement over buttons," he said with a low laugh against her throat. "But when we're married, I'll insist all your dresses have a convenient bow like the one you wore the other night."

Marcy held her breath as a fierce joy swept over her. Was this what he meant by saying they had to talk?

For one blinding minute she basked in the thought of being Mrs. David Swenson, of being bound to him with the strongest of ties possible. What happiness it would be not to have to part from him after their lovemaking, to share breakfasts with him, and dinners . . . to create a home, to have dark-eyed babies—little replicas of this stupendous man.

Then reason inserted its cold logic, and her foolish dream fell apart. Even as she struggled to cling to the remnants, they fluttered tantalizingly out of her grasp. The arguments she'd faced throughout the day still held true. The agonizing cry of loss was swallowed, and she sagged limply against him.

"You'd better be careful what you say while casting your spell," she managed with a forced lightness. "A woman could take that as a proposal, and then where would you be?"

He held her tight against his chest and laid his cheek on her hair. "I'd be the happiest man in the world," he vowed huskily. A small chuckle lifted his chest. "I'll have you know that I've put in a full day devising ways to ask you that question, but once I had you in my arms, I couldn't remember one brilliant solution. I've been in many difficult situations and have never been at a loss for words. But nothing has prepared me, a confirmed bachelor of thirty-six, to say four simple words."

He pulled in a deep breath and tipped her head back for his inspection. "Will you marry me? Sweet Marcy, will you be my bride?"

Marcy fought the tears when she saw the anxiety

barely hidden in his eyes. Her lips parted, but something within her blocked the answer that every fiber in her screamed to give. Her confusion caused her sooty lashes to drift down under his searching look.

"Are you really surprised?" he asked softly, placing tender kisses on each lid. "Surely you must have known how I felt about you. I love you. Am I wrong in believing you love me, too?"

Marcy couldn't deny him that, and she met his gaze unflinchingly. "I love you, David. I've loved you since our first kiss. But you warned me from the beginning that I could expect nothing more from you."

She drew back from his eager search for her mouth, for with his confession of love, everything had become crystal clear. She couldn't block him from her life or deny him her love. But marriage was another proposition. It was a sacred commitment that she could make only if it included everything she knew a marriage must be. Otherwise, what was the purpose of taking the vows that she'd already secretly given to him?

She belonged to him body and soul, till death do them part. But she was a realist. She'd seen too many marriages disintegrate under the corrosion of time. After David's first passion was gone, how long would his professed love last under the strain of their long separations? It would be catastrophic enough to see its crumbling without having to go through the added pain of a divorce.

"Didn't you recognize that for what it was?" he questioned with an amused inflection. "That was the routine line of the bachelor declaring his freedom. In

my case, even as I said it, I suspected it was a last dying gasp. When I had to leave for Kenya, I ran scared."

He folded her gently into the warmth of his arms as he continued. "When I realized I was counting the days until I could follow up on that kiss, I knew I was in trouble. Before it had always been, out of sight, out of mind. But with you I was fantasizing mind-boggling meetings, and I'd break out in cold sweats thinking that perhaps you hadn't been affected as I was, or worse, that you might be in someone else's arms."

David folded her closer in a possessive clasp. Marcy rested with her head against his chest, the heavy beat of his heart under her ear a part of his surprising confession. For the first time he was letting her into his inner thoughts, and she closed her eyes, thrilling at his words.

"I never tore through a problem like I did that time in my need to return. I needed to either put to rest the hold you had over me, or give life to my fantasies." His cheek rubbed over her hair as he paused in a private reminiscence.

"I discovered all that special feeling was still there only magnified. You felt it too, didn't you?"

Marcy's head moved under his cheek. He placed a kiss on her forehead as a chuckle rumbled in his chest. "You have no idea after that first kiss how close you came to being slung over my shoulder and taken to my room. I wanted you entirely, and instead had to console myself with a kiss."

"And we both had heavy work schedules, and my mother was sick. I had to stay by her side," Marcy

added, her fingers curling into the space between the buttons on his shirt as the remembered frustrations over the fleeting kisses they had exchanged gripped her. How she had ached to be in his arms like this!

"But the inevitable had to happen," he murmured thickly, dropping tiny warm kisses over her face. "My sweet firebrand! You gave of yourself so beautifully even as you took me into your soul. Didn't you know that after that I could never give you up?"

He curled a few strands of her hair around his hand and tilted her head back to stare fiercely into her eyes. "Can you understand now how I felt when I returned this last time and found you kissing someone else in that damned car? You're lucky I didn't pull him out and pound him into small pieces!"

"But you never told me how you felt!" she shot back, remembering the burning anger that had erupted under his autocratic demands never to date others again. "You disappeared for six months, without a word or letter of explanation. How do you think I felt wondering what type of fool I'd been to fall into your arms, only to be ignored?"

She vividly remembered the painful bewilderment, the final tearing anger she'd suffered through, and she pushed from his embrace to glare at him. "How dare you to demand trust and commitment when you won't even explain what happened during six months of your life! Does marriage to you mean I'll have to be content with the occasional few weeks you deign to be home, and I'll just have to suffer through long months of loneliness waiting for you? What of my life, David Swen-

son? Did you ever think what I might want from a husband . . . that I might want to have his children? I want to have the security of a husband, a father that didn't disappear periodically into some limbo that mustn't be questioned. Can you give me that?"

All the pain she'd endured erupted to underline her words with scathing emphasis. They stared at each other in white-faced silence, and Marcy felt her heart slowly turn to ice against the waiting heartbreak as she saw him withdraw within himself.

She had presented her case all wrong, but the facts remained. Until he accepted her into his life in the fullest sense, it would be impossible to consider marriage.

"Then you're denying that you love me?" he questioned bleakly.

"No." Hadn't he understood a word of what she'd said? she wondered despondently. "I could never do that. But I'm denying the feasibility of a marriage between us."

She swung away from his embrace and fumbled to close her zipper. She bent her head, feeling desperately like crying. Why did he have to stop to talk instead of following their passion to its natural ending? Had she just killed any hope they might have had, she wondered morosely.

"Do you want me to give up my job?"

Marcy's head snapped up to stare at the harsh lines grooving his face. "I would never do that!" she protested in outrage. "I would never presume to ask something like that of anyone. I can appreciate how you

must enjoy the challenge of your work. We were discussing the feasibility of a marriage between us, and I was pointing out why I couldn't accept a life with a man who was hardly ever home."

He glowered at her in mutinous concentration. "Tell me then how you plan to ignore the attraction that flares between us. Are you saying that if I touched you now you could remain immune?"

His hands balled into white-knuckled fists warning of the immense control he was exerting on himself. "Are you telling me that I'm never again to hear you sigh when I kiss you? Are you going to deny me the experience of having you writhe like a wildcat under me until you drive me out of my mind? And having had all that, do you think I'd ever permit other men to experience what is mine?"

Marcy stared at him, wide-eyed. Surely there must be some acceptable resolution, she thought. Surely there was some way she could have David.

"Oh, David!" she whispered on a sigh of intense longing.

His expression softened slightly as he stared at her. "You feel the same way I do. I admit that I'm not strong enough to fight my emotions . . . are you?" She shook her head, and his gaze became lost in the shimmering highlights as her pale hair swung across her shoulders. The corners of his mouth turned down in a self-deprecating smile. Flinging himself against the cushions, he closed his eyes. "This is one for the books," he muttered as if to himself. "I spend all day bolstering my courage to do what I once thought was impossible only

to have my marriage proposal thrown back in my face."

His chest moved in a deep sigh. Marcy sensed his hurt, and for the first time she saw the exchange from his eyes. He had honored her with his proposal, and she had, indeed, thrown it back at him, but what else could she have done? She could have given the rejection more gently, but did he have any idea how she was hurting to have to turn him down?

Unconsciously, her hand went to his arm in a quest for forgiveness. He shifted his head to look at her, and she flinched on seeing the raw pain exposed for a fleeting second before his mouth firmed into its characteristic resolute line. She should have remembered that he was superlative in his job because he was a man of quick decisions and bulldog tenacity. He'd long ago discovered that if one door was locked, another could be forced open.

"I could move away and try to get you out of my system," he said with harsh emphasis, pausing for an instant to evaluate the tremor that came to her hand. "But I'm no masochist. I love you . . . I want you . . . and you've admitted to the same feelings. If marriage isn't what you wish, that leaves only one route open, doesn't it? We'll continue the affair that we've already started."

Marcy had already accepted that alternative and therefore was surprised over the deep sense of sadness that swept through her. She felt as if all her dreams were dissolving around her.

A nerve twitched along David's jaw when he saw

the anguish darkening her eyes. He drew her into the warm circle of his arms and cradled her head on his shoulder.

A last surge of regret faded as her lips sought the exposed skin above his collar and placed there a kiss of compliance.

She loved this man to a terrifying degree and knew she could never end what they had.

She vowed to make his stay here, however short, so memorable that he couldn't wait to return. It would be her insurance to carry her through the dark days when his apartment would be empty.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Marcy braced herself on her elbow and drank in the sleep-softened features of the man beside her. Dear Lord, how she loved him!

Their lovemaking had held a bittersweet quality that had brought her close to tears, but that had soon changed when he'd claimed her with magnificent domination. It seemed each time they made love they found new things to discover and share. He was a lover beyond description, and her softly aching, yet sated body was the proof. Surely having a ring on her third finger could add nothing to what they had now.

Reluctantly Marcy looked at the clock. It was time to dress, slip across the lawn, undress, shower, dress again, and make breakfast for her mother and herself. She stilled the incipient rebellion against this routine she'd locked herself into by reminding herself she had no other choice.

What she longed to do, she admitted, was to dress in one of her sexy robes and prepare a breakfast to share with the man she loved. But that was the prerogative of wives, and she'd forfeited that right, she re-

minded herself forcefully.

"Escaping so soon?" David asked sleepily, as he rolled on his back and stuffed her pillow under his head to observe her dressing.

"We all can't lie in bed until the last minute," she replied testily, forcing her gaze away from the wide expanse of chest and the hair between his nipples. She was remembering all too vividly how her hand had moved fretfully through it, urging him to even greater abandon in his lovemaking.

"This isn't how I wanted it," he reminded her carefully. "I wanted it so we could share our second cup of coffee together before we took off to work."

"Is this the technique you plan using?" she demanded, denying her own longing with a rebellious thrust to her jaw. "Are you hoping to wear down my defenses by reminding me of the alternatives?"

"Are they defenses?" he prodded gently.

Wary of his suddenly alert look, Marcy averted her face, searching through her pocketbook for a comb to give some order to her hair. As she knew all too well, he was very adept at tearing down defenses.

"Of course not!" she denied firmly. "But I admit I don't relish these early morning evictions from a warm bed. But considering that you've gone through it all these years, I guess I can survive," she added defiantly. How many beds had he left? No doubt too many to count! She glowered with a surprising twinge of jealousy that wasn't helped by the gleam of laughter she caught in his eyes.

"Come here and kiss me, sweet goose!" he com-

manded, and Marcy collapsed against him, unable to resist meeting his grin with one of her own. His mouth fastened over hers in a kiss of possession that she wished would go on forever.

"That will have to do until tonight," he said huskily, after clearing his throat. "Remember, I love you," he whispered, sealing the vow into her mouth with a final kiss.

"I love you, too," she returned before rising, and was surprised by the extent of her reluctance to leave him.

As she hurried from the apartment, Marcy realized that she almost hoped that their passion would eventually lose its intensity. Then she might be able to handle his next departure. But what if the opposite was true? she wondered. Perhaps as she got to know David more intimately at every level, she'd be even more devastated than before.

At work Marcy managed to smooth most of the feathers she'd ruffled the day before. She decided that she'd just have to accept the uncertainties inherent in her position. It was something she never thought she could do, but that was before she'd met David and experienced the uncontrollable emotions he could trigger.

She'd wondered that morning if her mother suspected what was happening. Though her mother had never meddled in her private life, Martha was a very intelligent and perceptive woman even though partially housebound. Could she really be completely unaware of her feelings for David, Marcy wondered.

It was evident Martha adored David and hoped for something lasting to develop between her daughter and him. Marcy stared dispiritedly out of the window of her small office. It struck her that by refusing David's proposal, she was denying her mother the grandchildren she longed for. Maybe someday, after David's desire for her had faded, she'd be able to accept someone and be able to make her mother happy. She didn't believe that her love for David would fade, but she'd learned one lesson during the past six months. With time, she could learn to manage a life without him. She'd almost succeeded once, and if he should move away so that she'd never see him again, she could do it again.

She winced at the thought of that eventual torture and went to the stockroom to see if the shipment of new swimsuits had come in. When she'd seen the gorgeous colors and designs, she'd been hard pressed not to overbuy; she now wondered if she should have followed her first instincts. The sale was a big one and was to be advertised in the weekend papers. She'd better check that they were prepared for the bargain hunters certain to come swarming in. She'd spent enough company time on her personal problem.

When Marcy returned home that night, her mother informed her that David had stopped in to see her that morning before going to New York, and she'd invited him to have dinner with them. He'd accepted the invitation, promising to supply the wine.

"I took that lovely steak out of the freezer and had Delia scrub the potatoes and bake them so that they'd

be ready for you to make that delicious filling. Was that all right?" she asked anxiously. "I know how tired you are some evenings, but David is such a relaxing person to be with that I didn't think you'd mind. Besides, he needs a few good home-cooked meals to put back some of that weight he lost."

"It's all right, love," Marcy consoled, placing a kiss on her soft cheek. "We'll do our best to fatten him up." She smiled as she hurried to change. *David . . . relaxing? Oh, Mother, if you only knew!*

Marcy knew something was wrong as soon as David arrived. She was in the kitchen preparing the salad when he came in carrying a bottle of wine. He'd always exuded supreme confidence, but now he seemed wary as he uncorked the bottle, permitting the wine to breathe. But later when he came to her with the stride of a conqueror and pulled her against his lean thighs, Marcy's worries dissolved as her senses reeled.

"It's been eleven and a half hours," he growled hungrily. "It's long enough for a man to starve!"

Her arms slid across his shoulders as she reached urgently for his kiss. Starving! Pressed intimately into the heat of his masculinity, Marcy admitted the extent of her own hunger. It was as if everything that had transpired that day had been an interference—a delaying action that had conspired to keep them apart. This is where she belonged, the only place where she could be whole.

Her mouth moved under his, telling that she belonged to him totally, that he was her sun, her moon,

the stars of her universe.

"My God," he groaned hoarsely, tearing his mouth away. "You're scorching me, lady!"

The teakettle whistled loudly, startling them both. He glared at it, then rested his forehead against hers with a rueful acceptance. "Later, sweet love. We'll continue this later in my room where there'll be no damned whistle calling time out!" he promised. His smile was strained when he released her, telling of the tremendous control he was exerting on himself. "Meanwhile I'd better get out of here before I drag you into your bed."

It took several minutes before Marcy could stop trembling enough to pour the boiling water over the waiting vegetables.

Somehow nothing was burned or undercooked, and Marcy's whirling emotions became manageable. They ate in the comfortable breakfast room that had become their dining area when the more formal room had been converted into Martha's bedroom.

Their conversation ran through many topics. It wasn't until serving the dessert that Marcy's uneasiness returned when she glanced up to meet David's brooding stare. The look in his eyes disappeared immediately, but it had been intense enough to raise questions in her. What was wrong—had she done something to displease him?

As if aware that he'd given something away, David turned on his charm, and the incident was forgotten. By the time they finished the dishes, he had her laughing helplessly over an outrageously embroidered story

about the faux pas of an overeager engineer in the office.

"You'll forgive me if I go to bed early?" Martha asked sleepily when they returned. "Sylvia took me for a ride through Branch Brook Park in Newark to see the cherry blossoms in bloom. You must see them. . . . They were simply glorious. Those who've seen them both say our display is much more spectacular than that in Washington, and I believe them. But I missed my afternoon nap, and all that fresh air is catching up with me."

David flashed Marcy a leering grin, and she was hard pressed not to laugh at his outrageous smirk even as ripples of anticipation went through her. In short minutes she'd be in his arms, and every nerve ending was already quivering at the thought.

David was waiting for her in the kitchen after she kissed her mother good night. He gathered her close, one hand cupping her head against his cheek in an embrace that was strangely asexual, yet comfortingly warm. It was as if for the moment he was content to simply absorb the feel of her body against his without the emotional overlay that always became part of their touching.

It lasted mere seconds, and he placed a chaste kiss on her forehead before holding her away. His thumbs traced small circles on her shoulders as he gazed down into her bemused eyes.

"I know you dislike that early morning walk back here. Would you like me to stay with you?" His mouth quirked in a wry smile. "As you so succinctly stated,

men are more used to leaving a warm bed."

Marcy stared at him, startled at the thought of having him in her bed. If she admitted him there, she thought, all the small hedges she kept building as protection against his eventual abandonment would be crushed.

Quickly covering her hesitation, she smiled archly at him. "Heavens, no! I need that quick jog through the brisk morning air to wake up!"

His smile widened into a grin as he slipped his arm around her shoulders in a quick hug and held her close to his side as they crossed the lawn.

"I have a confession to make," he said. "I was plotting devious methods of slipping your mother a sleeping pill so that we could escape early. My thanks go to Sylvia, whoever she is, for taking her for a ride and tiring her out."

"You'd never!" Marcy cried, then giggled at the thought.

"You'll never know, will you?" he teased, as they reached the top of the stairs. He closed the door behind them, and the atmosphere changed dramatically as he stared at her with a new heated intensity.

His fingers feathered a light caress over the soft curve of her cheek. "Come into my arms, my darling. I'm tired of their being empty, aching to hold you."

With a sigh, Marcy slipped into the haven of his arms, her own clasping around his waist. Didn't he realize she'd been suffering from the same syndrome?

His hand moved in testing circles over her back until they reached her waist. They rested there before

splaying out to press her hips to his. He'd instructed her well, and she arched into his warmth, thrilling to the perfect union of their bodies that even their clothes couldn't veil.

She raised her lips with expectant eagerness. He kissed her lightly and gently as if anticipating the intoxication waiting beyond the softly pursed lips.

Marcy gave herself unto the magic that was David. She plucked at his shirt held snug by the belt around his narrow waist. When that couldn't be accomplished quickly enough, she worked the buttons free and gasped in pleasure as her fingers twisted through the crisp curls on his chest.

She'd been unaware that he'd performed the same task until he brushed her blouse from her shoulders. She shrugged impatiently from its confines, eager to return to her absorbing ritual. But he pulled her close, flattening her soft breasts against his muscular chest, molding flesh to hot flesh. He sealed her mouth into his possession, challenging her tongue into an erotic duel.

She clung helplessly to his shoulders as the desire flowing through her became a white-hot river of lava. He crushed her closer, willingly burning himself with its heat. Her world spun in blackening circles, and she sagged against him in need of his support.

"You poor darling," he muttered thickly, tearing his mouth from hers. "I could at least let you breathe."

"It would help," she agreed with a bewitched smile that glazed his eyes further. "It's a habit I happen to have." She gazed at him, her love flowing in molten

waves. A lock of hair had fallen over his forehead, and she brushed it tenderly, aching away from his flushed face. How she loved every wonderful part of him!

They moved as one to the bedroom, their clothes a forgotten trail behind them. He placed her with tender urgency on the bed, and she opened her arms as he lowered himself over her.

They paid lavish attention to each other's secret places, responding thrillingly to each erotic touch. Marcy was barely aware of the moans of entreaty shuddering up from her throat as their slick, heated bodies writhed in primitive supplication for the ultimate release.

David, finally reaching the end of his endurance, claimed his position. They rode the gale until, with gasps of exaltation, they leaped in unison into the outer darkness that went beyond life.

When the pounding in their chests receded and they could once again breathe normally, they looked at each other with awe. Tears shimmered in Marcy's eyes. They'd been given a priceless gift that transcended mere passion—a supreme gift of a shared love.

David pressed her lids closed with tender kisses. They didn't speak for long minutes. . . . What words could do justice to what they'd just experienced? Finally, rolling from her, he drew her gently into his arms, where she snuggled contentedly into their warmth.

"Did you set the alarm?" she slurred drowsily. Every fiber of her body was overcome by a delicious languor.

He turned to lift the alarm button before settling

her feminine curves against his hard body. She wiggled into closer alignment and gave a soft yelp at the nip he placed on her shoulder.

"Provocative imp!" he murmured. "Are you trying to work me into an early grave? Perhaps it's a good thing that they're sending me to Texas tomorrow for a few days."

The heat flowed from Marcy's veins to be replaced with ice water. So soon! Only three days and he was already running off! "I see," she murmured, keeping her voice carefully neutral. "Then I won't see you for a while."

A few days, he'd said, but all Marcy could think of were the long lonely nights that lay ahead.

"I just need to check out a few facts on a job we have going down there," he explained, his voice thickening with sleep. "Save Sunday night for me, love." Short minutes later the slow rise and fall of his chest against her back told of his sleep.

Marcy stared bleakly out of the open window. For unforgettable minutes they'd been as close as two people could be, yet he'd been insensitive to the desolation his announcement had caused her. Would marriage to him make these partings any easier? On top of that question tumbled another, even more painful one. Could any man as passionate as David last for weeks—months—without physical gratification? How could she handle the knowledge that he was holding another woman in his arms?

Marcy's throat ached with suppressed tears burning threateningly near the surface. In a few minutes they'd

demand their release, and she didn't want to let David see her cry. Careful not to wake him, she inched from under his hand lying possessively around her waist. She hurriedly slid her dress over her head, and she gathered the rest of her clothes, not putting on her shoes until she descended the stairs.

She thought of nothing but her own unhappiness until she entered the kitchen, where she stopped, stricken on finding her mother by the stove. Oh Lord, she groaned in stark embarrassment as she tried to ball up the incriminating lacy underwear she carried in her hands.

"I felt restless, so I thought a cup of warm milk might help," Martha said, turning back to the stove to hide her reaction. "I see you're having some troubles along the same line."

Marcy sagged into a chair by the oak table. How was she going to explain this away? she moaned in acute discomfort. Suddenly, what had been beautiful appeared tawdry, and a shudder went through her. She could imagine how she must appear—partially dressed with her tousled hair, her love-kissed lips still swollen. "Mother . . ." she began with a helpless flutter of her hand.

"It's all right, darling," Martha said, as she carefully deposited the mug on the table and sat in the chair across from her. "You're old enough to not have to explain your actions." She took a careful sip of the hot milk as she gazed with a troubled expression at the bent head of her daughter.

"Believe it or not, I was young once also, and I

know how a man of David's charisma can be hard to resist." When Marcy glanced up at her in question, she gave a small smile. "Your father was quite irresistible. Fortunately for me his intentions were honorable, and he married me."

"David wants to marry me," Marcy confessed in a tight voice.

Martha waited for further enlightenment. There was no joy in the announcement, and her concern deepened. "Then we should be celebrating with something more than hot milk!" she ventured. "I know that you love him, and I hoped he could return it."

Marcy's eyes widened in surprise. Had her joy the past few days been so apparent?

"I saw how you ached with him gone," Martha explained. "Believe me, I could almost feel the pain, and I knew there was nothing I could do to help make it easier for you. Then when he returned and I saw how you both couldn't keep your eyes from each other, I was so happy for you."

Her gnarled hand reached across the table to still the restless twitching of her daughter's. "Tell me, dear. Why aren't you happy? Don't you want to marry him?"

"Oh, Mother!" Marcy moaned. She blinked against the threatening tears. "I want it more than anything else in my life, but I refuse to be a part-time wife. I don't want to spend the rest of my life waiting for him to come home from some foreign country. He's been here less than a week, and tomorrow he has to take off again. What kind of existence would that be?"

Her mother's face creased with consternation.

"There's no reason you couldn't travel with him. Bertha did for years until her husband was promoted up the ladder to a desk job," she offered, reminding her of the friend who'd given their name to David when he'd been searching for a permanent place to live.

"David would die if he were tied to a desk," Marcy refuted with conviction. "And with the way he refuses to talk about his job, I doubt he'd want to have a wife tagging along with him!"

"Have you discussed this with him?" Martha asked.

Marcy gave a dismissive shrug. "What's to discuss? It wouldn't change the facts," she returned bitterly. She'd been over it too many times in her own mind not to accept it as the truth.

Her mother took another sip from the mug before staring resolutely at her distraught daughter. "I'm part of that problem, aren't I? You've been a wonderful daughter, remaining with me when at your age you should have your own place. I thought I'd been explicit when explaining that I don't want that type of sacrifice. I've had my life, and it's time you had yours. Happiness is such a fleeting thing, darling. You should grab it with both hands when you have a chance at it." Tears rimmed her eyes, telling of a happiness once experienced and now gone forever.

"Don't ever think like that!" Marcy said fiercely. "I love you. I won't have you think that I'm involved in any sacrifice by remaining here!"

Martha rose painfully to her feet and picked up her mug. "It's late, and if we're to get any sleep, we'd better get to bed." She paused by her daughter and placed

a kiss on the top of her head. "Don't set your alarm. If you oversleep, I'll call the store for you and say you're not feeling well. After all, you do have some sick time due you." She paused by the door and smiled reassuringly at her daughter. "I love you, too, my dear. Things have a way of working out, you'll see."

Marcy watched her leave, a sad smile on her lips. How many mothers would have treated what could have been a horribly embarrassing confrontation with such loving finesse? But nothing had been solved. The problems were just as insurmountable as ever.

CHAPTER NINE

The alarm ringing stridently on her night table woke Marcy with a jolt. When had sleep finally come? she wondered, pressing her fingers against her temples in an effort to still the dull throbbing.

Several aspirin and a soothing shower later, she managed to present a reasonable front to her mother when she brought in her breakfast. Nothing was said of their midnight conversation. Marcy felt her nerves were too raw to talk on the subject.

Her eyes always had what a past suitor had called "a bewitching bruised look," but the dark shadows she saw in the mirror were too obviously the result of a restless night. After a jaundiced look at her reflection, she applied her makeup, trying as best she could to disguise the tired lines.

Were the short hours spent in heaven worth the days, the weeks of despondency that had to be faced each time that David was called away? She pushed her hand wearily through her hair, fluffing the natural wave. The answer was obviously yes, or why would she submit herself to this agony?

She was stacking the dishes before leaving for work when she heard David's unmistakable firm tread on the back porch. There was something about the sharp rap on the door that made her bite her lip. David, she guessed, was not in the best of moods, but neither was she. She lifted her chin almost defiantly as she opened the door.

David glowered at her before stalking past her. She closed the door and followed him into the kitchen with wary forbearance. When they last spoke, he had been a man purring in deep contentment. He now seemed a time bomb ready to explode.

"What time did you leave?" he growled. "Why weren't you still with me this morning? You knew I have to be away for a few days. Didn't you think I'd want you by my side when I woke up?"

Marcy stiffened with resentment. There was no morning kiss, only recriminations over an imagined slight. Well, she had a few time bombs of her own.

"When I came back, my mother was here heating some milk."

The words had him stop in mid-tirade. His face paled as he took in her defiant expression that did little to hide the painful embarrassment that meeting had caused.

"Oh, Marcy," he murmured contritely, "I'd give anything to have saved you from that!"

She turned from him, shaken by the pain in his eyes. Could he really understand what she'd gone through? Somehow she'd never thought him capable of being that sensitive. Their attraction had been at a dif-

ferent level. There was so much she didn't know about this man she loved!

"Dammit, if we were married, there'd be no reason for you to be submitted to that!" he grated in frustration.

Marcy's shoulders sagged wearily. She was in no shape to argue along those lines. "Would you like a cup of coffee? There's some in the pot, but you'll have to excuse me if I don't share one with you. I have to get to work."

"Were you really going to let me leave without a final kiss?" he asked in bewilderment.

Marcy caught her breath. Had it really meant so much to him? If she were the one to leave, wouldn't she be as upset if he'd neglected that final kiss, especially after what they'd shared? She'd been so wrapped up in her own misery that her only thought had been to hide in the privacy of her room.

"I thought you'd need time to pack," she offered lamely.

He gave a dismissive shrug. "I've done it so often all I need is five minutes." His hands went out to her, and as if driven by some primitive instinct, Marcy went to him, her body already anticipating the glory of being in his arms. He folded her in his strong clasp, welding her body against his. His sigh breathed pure contentment. His mouth settled over hers, and Marcy walked into enchantment. His hand fluting down her back pressed sensitively at each curve, starting the liquid heat to build. This was madness, a small part of her protested, but another gleefully answered, yes, total,

wonderful madness!

"And you were going to deny us this!" he growled, his voice a thick, richly textured reprimand. "Oh, Marcy, sweet love, how can you not marry me so we have this to share every morning?"

Marcy stared at him, wailing inwardly over the abrupt tumble from her euphoria. Nothing had changed. "You mean every morning that you happen to be around," she corrected sadly. "Do you realize that each time you've been here it's been for a shorter period? First it was two weeks, then ten days, and now only three. What will it be next—a quick one-night lay-over?" she ended bitterly, pulling from his arms.

A startled uncertainty covered his face. "It's not usually like that," he protested.

"No?" she declaimed, unbelieving. "How could I know differently? Tell me, how long were you away on the assignment before you moved here, and the one before that?"

His eyes wavered under her challenge. "It never made any difference before," he muttered as if to himself.

"You'd better go," she said tiredly. They could talk all day and only go in circles. There were no answers.

He reached to stop her retreat, and his glance fell on his wristwatch. He muttered a sharp oath on seeing the time. "I have to go or I'll miss my flight, but don't think we've had the last word on this," he stated, his mouth firming with determination.

He tipped her chin up, and his kiss told of his frustration and anger, yet his tenderness was undeniable,

and it brought a sheen of tears to Marcy's eyes.

He gently kissed each lid closed. "We'll find a solution Sunday," he promised huskily. "Trust me."

She watched his lithe stride as he went to his car. She wasn't going to cry, she told herself furiously. She'd done her crying, and it had solved nothing. It would be better if she concentrated on building a strong defense because when he returned, she'd have to tell him what they'd been privileged to share was all over. Marcy knew she couldn't take this constant emotional tearing any longer.

David called that night, but he was out in the field, and the connection had to be patched through. It was so poor that she was left frustrated by a conversation that remained mostly indecipherable. The next day wasn't much better.

Fortunately her work load had increased. The spring sales were in full swing to make space for the summer line and the beginning of the fall clothes. She found she had to make an overnight trip into New York to place an additional order for the winter fashions. They always seemed to be racing the seasons, she realized grimly. The anticipation and the previews had been one of the perks of the job, but this time they seemed a tedious repetition. Was she suffering a burnout so early in her career, she wondered despondently. Reason warned it was part of her missing David and their less than satisfying attempts to communicate.

She took his call on the extension in her room when it came in on Saturday night. She'd put in a miserable day preparing herself to tell David of her deci-

sion the following day. It therefore took a minute for what he said to penetrate even though the connection was surprisingly good for a change.

"Am I hearing correctly that you're not coming tomorrow?" she questioned sharply.

"I'm sorry, honey," he returned. "This has turned into a bigger mess than anticipated. I've been working day and night to get it finished so I could get back on time, but there's still a lot that has to be done."

She steeled herself against the obvious tiredness in his voice. "Nothing has changed, has it, David?" she said stonily, and suddenly felt as tired as he sounded. "Don't bother calling again. You must see that it's all hopeless."

There was a long, pain-filled silence before David answered. "Do you really mean what you're saying? Doesn't what we have mean anything to you?"

Marcy could make no reply over the constriction in her throat. She heard the long breath that he pulled in before he continued. "I'm too exhausted to fight for us any longer. I have no energy left. I've offered you my love, and I can't give any more. If it isn't worth your consideration, then perhaps we'd better stop now before we hurt each other further. The next step is up to you."

"Good-bye, David. Take care of yourself." She didn't know if he heard her because the static had come back on the phone. Slowly, with infinite attention, she replaced the receiver.

It was over . . . done . . . finished. David had handed her the out. Wasn't this what she had wanted?

Where was her feeling of relief?

She suddenly felt empty of emotion. It was a form of shock, she suspected, and accepted it gratefully, knowing it wouldn't last long.

Her mother tore at it immediately, although unknowingly, when she joined her with their evening cup of tea. "Was the connection any better?" she asked solicitously, knowing that Marcy had been irritated by the less-than-satisfying phone calls of the past few days.

"Yes," she murmured. "I heard very distinctly what he was saying." She glanced at her mother, wondering if her voice betrayed the hollowness she was feeling. "How was your day? Did any of your friends visit?"

Her mother had a surprising number of friends that willingly came to entertain her, taking her out as frequently as her condition permitted. Perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Martha's illness had made her sensitive to the moods of others, and over the years she'd become the repository for many of their hopes and problems.

"Sheila came for tea," Martha informed her. "We had a long and productive conversation."

Something in her mother's voice made Marcy look at her sharply only to find her staring into her cup of tea as if searching for her next words.

"Things haven't been going too well for her since her husband died," she continued. "She'd been told that her rent will be increased shortly, and a company that he'd invested heavily in had failed, so her income has been sharply reduced."

Marcy could understand her mother's concern.

Sheila had been a close friend since school days, had in fact been one of Martha's bridesmaids. Financial problems were hitting many older people with fixed incomes, and some of her widowed friends were forced into curtailing the pleasures they'd previously taken for granted.

"She'll find it difficult to find a nice apartment that she can afford," Marcy said with sympathy.

Martha nodded in agreement. "She's been looking and is quite discouraged. The alternative is moving in with her son and daughter-in-law. While they get along fine, that's the last thing she wants to do."

Giving a short sigh, she set her cup down carefully. The look she gave her daughter held a touch of defiance. "I invited her to come live here."

Marcy's surprise was complete. "You mean you're offering her one of the upstairs bedrooms?"

"No, that's not what I mean," her mother said forcefully.

Marcy's face paled. "You're giving her the carriage house apartment?" Was this her mother's way of solving the problem of a wayward daughter? Little did she realize that David would be leaving soon anyway. A pain swelled in her chest as a black desolation settled over her.

"Of course not!" Martha reprimanded. "That's David's as long as he wants it. After our conversation the other night, I realized that I'm partially to blame for the position you're taking over David. No, wait a minute and hear me out," she stated, holding up a hand to halt Marcy's denial.

"You've never lived anyplace but here, and I can see that it's become a comfortable nest you're reluctant to leave. I'm thankful that you've been happy here, and you've been a wonderful daughter and a great comfort to me, but I realize that I've been selfish in not insisting you try your own wings. Perhaps then you wouldn't consider traveling with David a hardship . . . could see it for what it is, a broadening experience."

Marcy couldn't believe what she was hearing. "And what about my career? . . . Am I to throw it away after all my hard work to get this far?"

"That is a decision you have to make by yourself. The experience you've acquired should help you wherever you may live. And when the time comes when David accepts a more permanent position, you'll have a broad base of knowledge to work from. Besides, for now, is your job at Danielson's more important to you than your love for David? If you give him up, do you think that what you feel for him could ever be duplicated with someone else? Somehow I can't see you settling for something second best."

The words were like a knife turning in her. Marcy's lashes fluttered down to hide the truth the words forced on her. What she and David shared was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and in fact the thought of being held in the arms of another man was totally abhorrent.

"Why are you doing this?" she cried. Why was her mother, who had never willingly hurt her, tearing at the very fabric of her soul?

"Because I love you," her mother returned softly.

"And because I can see that David is so right for you. Think, my darling. Think before you throw away the most precious gift a woman can receive . . . the love of a good man."

Martha agonized as she gazed lovingly at her daughter. "Don't hate me for what I'm doing. Don't you see with Sheila here you needn't worry about my being alone? I know that's been a concern for you. She'll be my friend and companion."

Marcy looked at her mother, her eyes bright with unshed tears. For some reason she was unable to tell her what had just happened—that her mother's efforts to further her relationship with David were unnecessary. She accepted that what Martha was attempting was done with love, but it had come all too late. She'd already shut the door on the man she loved.

The old problems surfaced. Her mother believed that David would want her with him, but she knew all too well how on some of the out-of-the-way sites a woman would be considered an impediment. And what of her own desire for a stable homelife, for children? How long would it be, if ever, before David accepted a more permanent position as Bertha's husband had?

"I could never hate you, Mother," she consoled her. "I can also see that having Sheila here with you would be good for you both. I have worried at times over leaving you alone, especially when I've had to be away on a buying trip. When will Sheila be wanting my rooms? That is where you intended her to stay, isn't it?"

Martha stared worriedly at the still figure in the

chair, sensing a hidden grief. Had she been wrong in acting as she had? "Only if you want it. Her rent increase starts in another month."

"Then I'd better begin looking for a new place, shouldn't I?" Marcy stated with a forced brightness that she hoped was an effective cover for the brittleness she felt. She suddenly felt as if she had to be by herself. Everything was happening too quickly. She was being torn by the roots from everything that had meant security.

Her pain, her confusion, compounded by what she and David had said to each other over the phone had devastated her completely. Somehow, she'd have to find a way to handle it and learn how to survive.

CHAPTER TEN

"You're lucky to have found this sublet to rent. It's not half bad," Glen commented as he glanced over the comfortably furnished room.

Marcy positioned the potted fern by the living room window and then looked up at Glen. He was back from his selling swing through the New England states and had called her the day before to have her help him celebrate his success. When informed that she was in the midst of moving, he'd offered his services and had made the transfer of packed boxes a simple matter. Since the apartment was already furnished, there were only her personal items to move. The plants they'd bought that afternoon had been her attempt to give the rooms more personality.

"There used to be a large rambling Victorian house here, and I remember playing with a girl who lived in it when I was a kid," she explained as she stood back to evaluate the placement of the plant with a critical eye. "I loved the big airy rooms, and when it was torn down a few years ago and these garden apartments were built in its place, I refused to drive past them for

a long time. I never suspected I'd be living in one of them!"

"When did you decide to move?" Glen asked, as he bent to unpack a carton of books. He'd been floored when he'd heard of her decision. He'd seen the close ties between mother and daughter and had often wondered if a man could ever have a place in that set-up.

"A few weeks ago," Marcy returned, and something in her voice warned him not to press further on that subject. They worked in companionable silence as he handed books to her so that she could place them in the built-in bookcase.

"That's a job well done," he said later, as he cleared away the empty cartons. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, that should do it." Marcy glanced around the room with sad eyes. It had all happened so quickly that she felt she was moving in a dream, that she'd wake up shortly comforted by David's warm body beside her and feel his strong arms draw her closer, wiping away the nightmarish folly that she'd catapulted herself into.

"Then may I suggest you take a nap and get rid of some of these shadows?" he said softly, running a finger lightly over her cheekbone. "You've done enough this weekend. I'll come back later and take you out for a nice leisurely dinner."

She smiled at him, grateful for his assistance. Gratitude was the strongest emotion she could conjure up. She wished she could do better because Glen deserved more. But it was as if David had used up her quota of emotions, and she was drained, left with a cold, hol-

low emptiness inside.

"I really don't feel up to going out," she confessed. "But I have a counterproposal. There are those two steaks we picked up. I'll pay you back for all your help with a home-cooked meal."

His grin showed his pleasure. "I'll accept that before my conscience tells me you need your rest more. Suppose I pick up some wine to go with it?"

He kissed her lightly on the lips before he left, and Marcy began to wonder if her invitation had been wise. Glen might construe it to mean more than she intended—a simple thank-you.

She gave a weary sigh before stepping into the shower. She was exhausted. She was certain that her mother was as surprised and dismayed as she was over how quickly the parting had occurred. She'd been lucky enough to find this apartment in just a few days. After that it became a matter of pride to carry through with the move. It was as if fate had stepped in and decreed this was the new direction of her life.

There had been no further calls from David other than one to her mother, stating that his work had been extended still longer, and he would not be back for another few weeks. Marcy had been glad when she heard that. It would be far easier for her to move knowing David was nowhere near her. Had she really expected him to speak to her after her curt dismissal? In the confusion of packing and discarding, she didn't know if her mother was aware that his calls had stopped, that her grand gesture had been for nothing.

In the end Glen's appearance had been a godsend.

With him so much in evidence while helping with her moving, the two women had been forced to keep unhappy second thoughts in abeyance. They had managed to say good-bye to each other without the emotional scene they'd both been dreading. The only one truly happy had been Sheila, blissfully grateful over the fortunate conclusion of her problem.

The alarm dragged her from a sleep that left her as tired as when she had lain down for a nap. Would she ever be whole again? She had thought the mental anguish she'd gone through when David was in Bolivia had been bad enough, but this never-ending exhaustion was a new type of torture. Where before she enjoyed the challenge of her work, she now dreaded going. Each problem became another burden weighing her down. She knew she looked haggard—how could she fail to?

Her friends who knew of the deep affection she shared with her mother thought the change in her was because of a breakup in that relationship and Marcy's move, but she was too tired to attempt an explanation. They eventually would know that was not the cause. As for the real reason . . . that would remain locked in her heart. Time, she reasoned, would bring her out of this bottomless depression. And she had plenty of time. It spread before her as an unending bleakness.

Marcy dragged herself from her bed, and it was only the innate sense of style that had carried her so far in her profession that permitted her to dress with any coordination. Gone was the inner excitement over choosing just the right outfit. After all, she would never

again dress to please David.

Glen arrived with several bottles of wine. "So you'll have a start on a selection," he said generously.

He was in such a good mood that Marcy made an effort to rise above her lethargy. He didn't deserve a brooding companion after being so accommodating with his time and energy in helping her settle into the apartment.

But the effort drained her slim resources, and when Glen kissed her after they'd finished cleaning up the dishes, Marcy could offer no resistance or response. How could one man's kisses cause such rapture while another's seemed an invasion of one's privacy?

"You poor baby," Glen murmured with a consoling smile. "You're still too tired from this work to even kiss properly. The place for you is bed—alone this time, I'm afraid. I'll be busy the next two days, but save Wednesday for me. I'll take you out for dinner."

Marcy was only too grateful that he was leaving without a fuss, and agreed to the date. She wasn't about to go into hibernation as she'd done the last time David had left. Alone as she was now in her apartment, she found herself suddenly afraid of the long, solitary evenings that lay ahead of her.

It wasn't long before she realized her work could be her salvation. She could immerse herself in it for periods of time, forgetting about her problems with David.

"The scuttlebutt is out that you're in the race for head buyer now that Debra is leaving," Natalie said one day, as she set her tray on the table across from Marcy

in the cafeteria. "You've been working your tail off, lately, and the results are impressive. The women's clothes section never looked better."

Marcy looked at her in surprise. Was that what was circulating? A few months ago the promotion would have been a plum she'd reach for, but now her extra labors had been purely selfishly oriented—a way to exhaust herself so she could lose herself in sleep. "I hadn't heard that she'd actually be leaving."

"You've got to be kidding," Natalie hooted. "Ever since her divorce she's been sending out resumes. I heard Mr. Danielson offered her a fabulous increase, but she wants to get into the big time. I don't blame her." Natalie's cynical look became more pronounced. "I'd give you a run for your money if I hadn't found this hunk of man who's proving very interesting."

Marcy arched a brow in amusement. Natalie's two divorces didn't keep her from trying again. "Good luck. Maybe this one will be Mr. Right."

Natalie gave a sly laugh. "I fully intend to let him prove it!" She picked up her pocketbook and stood up to leave. "And good luck to you, too. But I'm warning you that Ben Foster in furniture is making a try at the job also, so you'd better keep on your toes. And by the way, if you need some choice items for your new apartment, I'm setting up a fabulous sale in my section."

She paused as she searched her purse for change. "We really do have some special bargains. I've some exceptional carved pieces of jade from Indonesia and some interesting soapstone done by the Alaskan Eskimos. Or an African ceremonial mask might look im-

pressive on your wall."

An irritated frown emerged as she picked up her bill. "It's so difficult getting new material that isn't immediately featured in other stores. If you get the job, I'm warning you I'll be haunting you over an idea that I've been tossing around. There are many seasoned travelers who go to out-of-the-way places. There must be some way to contact them about relaying information about different and unique finds discovered in small shops. When I think of all the untapped cottage industries . . . !"

Natalie smiled wryly and gave a small apologetic shrug. "So much for dreams!" she muttered. Fingering a small wave of hair, she left for the cashier.

Marcy's imagination was piqued. Natalie's idea had merit, but the initial work to get it off the ground would be formidable.

David had brought back a small statuette he'd bargained for while in Kenya. It was primitively executed yet strikingly dramatic, and very definitely something a true collector would snap up.

If she'd been with him, she'd have had a wonderful time searching out such items, especially if she were buying with someone else's money! The dream faded, having no basis in fact. She herself had made it impossible by severing the relationship.

Marcy sipped her coffee slowly. So the news was out that Debra was moving on to bigger things. That explained why Mr. Danielson was seen so often prowling through the department store. Just the other day

he'd stopped to compliment her on the improvements she'd made in displaying the new line of suits.

Should she make the effort to apply for the position as head buyer? she wondered. She knew the prodigious increase of work it would entail. It would mean total commitment. But what else had she to do with her time but to better herself?

This was the job that she'd aimed for when first starting work, and she tried to make herself feel excited. Instead, she put down her cup with a weary sigh. Damn David Swenson for draining her like this! How could he even now, with the end of their relationship, have the power to dim her ambition and have her wondering over the wisdom of her priorities?

She shook herself mentally. A year from now she'd laugh at herself for wavering like this. But, dear Lord, how she wished the year would hurry by!

On Sunday her mother insisted she come for dinner. Marcy had stopped by the house several times—at first reluctantly—expecting to be swamped with homesickness. Instead, she'd been surprised that she felt only a sense of nostalgia. She'd grown up in this comfortable house, had loved and been loved by her parents, and all her memories were good ones.

She had been hurt when she first saw how quickly her mother and Sheila had settled into a happy relationship. But she recognized her feeling as a childish sense of rejection and did her best to put it aside. The two women were of the same generation and had much in common. Slowly Marcy began to accept her

mother's wisdom in asking her to find an apartment of her own. The umbilical cord needed to be cut for her to reach a fuller maturity.

"You've lost more weight," Martha said with a worried frown when Marcy bent to place her customary kiss on her cheek.

Marcy had been surprised at her own weight loss even though she knew her appetite had been poor. She'd had to change dresses three times before finding one that didn't hang too loose on her slender frame. "They've got me running at work," she replied lightly, and before her mother could belabor the point, she quickly told of the possibility of a promotion. "I spoke to Debra, and she said she'd put in a good word with Mr. Danielson about me," she concluded.

Martha congratulated her but then frowned slightly. "Is that what you want?" she asked with concern. "What does David say about it?"

Marcy moved jerkily to the shelf of plants on display before the window and bent over them as if she was examining them. "Oh, I haven't mentioned it as yet," she admitted with a casual shrug as she plucked a dead leaf from an African violet. "There's nothing to say until I find out whether or not I get the job."

Hating her half truth, she looked for an excuse to leave the room. "Sheila," she said at last. "I'm certain you could do with an extra pair of hands in the kitchen."

"Everything is under control," Sheila protested. "You two have a nice comfortable chat while I make the gravy."

It was exactly what she wished to avoid, but Marcy sat down with a sigh of acceptance. It was better that her mother know the truth about David so that there wouldn't be any more of these awkward confrontations in the future.

Martha gazed worriedly at her daughter's drawn features for a thoughtful minute. "I'm glad you got your phone in so soon. I dare say you missed David's nightly calls."

Oh yes, I've missed them, she thought, but all they'd done was emphasize the hopelessness of our relationship. "David is tied up someplace away from the phone," Marcy stated bluntly. "I haven't heard from him for over a week."

"Oh, dear," Martha commiserated gently. "It must be difficult for you both."

Difficult, yes, and impossible. Marcy stared at her clenched hands before taking a determined breath and meeting her mother's gaze. "It's over, Mother. It's happened again, and I can't take it. He doesn't know how long the job will last before he can return, and I told him not to bother hurrying. I just can't take a marriage to a part-time husband. It would eventually tear me to pieces and kill our love."

Martha's expression showed her distress. "But you love him! How can you deny giving that love a chance?"

Marcy clenched. "I'm managing to cope," she said firmly. "If I get the new job, I'll soon be too busy to think of anything but my work." *Except at night, and during the long endless weekends*, she realized bleakly.

Her mother shook her head in disbelief. "I'm not a doddering old woman as yet. I saw how you felt about each other and was so happy for you both. David loves you, and I can't see him letting you go."

Marcy's mouth twisted in a sardonic grimace. "You were always a romantic, Mom. Real life isn't all roses and champagne."

"Only if people confuse the issues with twisted logic!" the older woman scolded. "Look at yourself! You've lost weight, you've lost all your inner vitality. What are you doing to yourself, child! How can you be so certain you can't share his life-style unless you give it a chance? I thought I'd brought you up to accept the challenges of life as they came. Doesn't loving David make fighting for him worth the effort?"

"David would be happy to hear he has such a champion!" Marcy bit out. She'd been so certain that her mother would understand her side and give her some sympathy!

"Only because anyone could see how right you are for each other!" her mother returned forcefully. She gazed at her daughter's bent head and continued more softly. "A woman can learn to love different men throughout her life if she loses out on one. But she has only one chance to experience a deep allgiving love that transcends mere affection. I believe that is what you and David have. I recognize it because it was what your father and I had. Did I ever tell you that I was engaged when we met? I could have had a good life with Jack, but I never stopped blessing my friends who introduced your father to me. The life we shared went

beyond 'good.' It was very, very special. Don't walk away from that experience. You should be grabbing it with both hands and never letting it go!"

The impassioned plea had Marcy wavering momentarily, but the disappointment and hurt she'd endured when David had told her that his stay in Texas would be prolonged indefinitely still grated on raw nerves. Then there was his callous refusal to explain the reason for his long, silent absence in Bolivia.

Marcy's face set in stubborn lines as she started her rebuttal, only to be interrupted by the front doorbell ringing. Her mother gave a small gasp of dismay. "I'm sorry," she apologized abjectly. "I didn't have a chance to tell you that Bertha was coming also. Her husband is away on a short field trip, and I invited her, thinking you might have something in common since he and David work for the same company."

Marcy closed her eyes to hide her distress. Bertha had been the one to recommend David when she heard they'd fixed the carriage house for renting. She was the last person she wanted to spend the evening with, but maybe now her mother would see her side of the hopeless situation. Evidently, even now, after many years of married life, Bertha still had to endure her husband going off and leaving her behind. It would be interesting to hear her comments on the subject.

The opportunity didn't arise until they returned to the living room for coffee after a superlative meal served by a proud Sheila. It was she who questioned where Bertha's husband was this time.

"In Texas," she replied, adding sugar to her coffee.

She smiled consolingly at Marcy. 'But you know all about it. Jim had to go out when David had that unfortunate accident.'

Marcy was thankful she hadn't taken her coffee as yet. It would have fallen from nerveless hands. Black swirls darkened the room, and she sank into the chair for support. David . . . hurt?

"I hadn't heard about it!" Sheila cried, as she gave Martha an accusatory look for not sharing the news. "Was he badly hurt?"

"Jim said he's out of the hospital," Bertha said, before adding with pleasure, "so now Jim will be coming home at the end of the week. They say David's quick action saved the life of one of the workers. With all the rain they've been having, David slipped in the mud when he pushed the man from the path of the falling rock. But in doing so, he fell into a ravine. Fortunately, nothing was broken, but he pulled some rib muscles, and that can cause as much pain as a broken bone."

Marcy winced. It was as if she, too, suffered the same injury, and the thought shocked her that she could still react so instinctively. Her healing had evidently not begun.

"Too bad your job kept you from flying to him, Marcy," Bertha continued in a mild accusatory reproach. "The men say he's been a bear lately, which is so unlike him. I told Jim it was only natural since he must miss you terribly."

Marcy looked helplessly at her mother, only to see the same censure there. Anger rose within her, and she

held on to it gladly as a protective shield against their subtle accusations. They were acting as if she were in some way to blame!

"Did you fly to your husband's side every time he was hurt?" she questioned stiffly.

"I went with him whenever he was sent out," Bertha corrected. We loved each other too much to tolerate any long separation. "We knew it was a period he had to put in before he had a more stabilized position, so we managed the best we could. I admit some of the places were quite primitive, but to me it was better than sitting home without him."

"And how did you manage after your children arrived?" Marcy challenged. David had offered no solution to that eventuality. "We'll work it out," he'd promised, but that had been too vague for her.

Bertha's expression became pensive. "I tutored them as long as I could. We were lucky. There was a good boarding school near his parents, and we enrolled them there. That way they could be with their grandparents on weekends, and of course they were with us during vacations. I admit the partings were difficult, but by the time they were in high school, Jim was promoted to the home office."

Her gaze settled on Marcy's troubled face, and her eyes softened with understanding. "My girls are married now, and I asked them just recently what they thought of their childhood. Children are adaptable, but one reads about emotional scarring, and I admit it had been a worry. They both said that as a result of living in so many countries, they had a much broader un-

derstanding of people than they could have had in any other way. And most important, they knew they were very much loved, so they never felt deprived."

Marcy felt shaken when she returned to her apartment. Had she placed too much emphasis on the sanctity of a home and its existence as the security required to raise children? She had an unsettling feeling that all her arguments had been a result of her own insular upbringing.

Bertha had presented a telling alternative that she'd never considered. Love, after all, was what made a home special. It wasn't the structure she'd lived in that had made her childhood so warm and memorable, but the love of her parents that had been a constant protective cushion. It would have been there no matter where they lived, or how often they had to move.

Now what? She berated herself later that night when she rose tiredly from her bed after tossing sleeplessly for unending hours. She looked at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and was appalled at the wan face she presented.

How much longer was she going to have to live with this never-ending torture? she groaned. The answer came then with clarion certainty. Until David returned and she was given the opportunity to reweave the rents she'd torn in the fragile material of their love. She loved David. How could she have permitted anything to obscure that essential fact?

She crept back into bed and slept soundly for the first night in what seemed like eons.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I shouldn't be telling you this, but I'm fairly certain that unless Mr. Danielson brings someone in from outside, you'll be his choice to take my place when I leave next month."

Debra imparted the information with a satisfied smile as she and Marcy shared a coffee break the next afternoon. "You're lucky you're not married. My husband couldn't take the long hours and the constant buying trips. Next time I'll be more careful who I decide to live with. Bill's idea of married life is spending an evening in front of the TV tube followed by an occasional romp in bed," she said, pulling a long face.

Marcy smiled slightly. Where was the surge of happiness the news should bring? Why did she have the depressing feeling she was being trapped? Was it that Debra's words warning of long hours and time spent away from home dimmed the attraction of the promotion? Would her job add a further problem to the marriage she'd finally decided she wanted?

But she'd worked extra hard, especially since David had left, and she knew she could do an excellent job.

Her notebook was crowded with new promotional ideas that she ached to try. Still, the nagging question haunted her. Would their two careers be able to mesh with each traveling in different directions? The logistics suddenly seemed daunting.

"Mr. Danielson will have to make the announcement soon, won't he?" Marcy questioned with a forced calmness. "Whoever he chooses will need to work with you for a while so the transition goes smoothly."

"That's what I warned him," Debra agreed, as they left the cafeteria. A thoughtful frown touched her face, showing a bit of indecision. "I hope I'm not making the wrong move. You'll find Mr. Danielson is a dear to work for most of the time, but it can be a jungle out there!"

Marcy watched Debra's trim figure until she was jostled by customers coming for afternoon refreshments at the coffee shop. She noted with abstract satisfaction that most were carrying bags printed with the store logo. The sales were proving successful.

Her mind then skidded to her own perplexing problem. Last night she'd been able to relax, comforted by the knowledge that once David returned, all would be put to rights. Debra's announcement, while pleasing her also depressed her. The waters were again being muddied by her indecision.

She carried her vacillation home with her. Weeks had passed without a word from David. Surely if he loved her the way he professed, he'd have made some effort to communicate with her. He said he wouldn't be near a phone for a while, but once in the hospital,

he could have phoned . . . or written. It was all a repeat of his disappearance while in Bolivia. If they were married, would he change enough to want to call her or write to her? Then she slowly admitted to herself that he had made the effort to phone her every night while in Texas. The questions and doubts repeated endlessly in her mind, confusing her more and more. The only one who could clarify everything was at some location in Texas that prevented her from contacting him.

Marcy had barely entered her apartment that night when the telephone rang. She was so involved in her thoughts about David that her heart beat in triple time as she dropped her purse and dashed to answer it. So certain was she that it was David calling that she could hardly contain her disappointment when she heard Bertha's enthusiastic greeting.

"I just spoke to your mother, Marcy, and she wanted me to call you to tell you the exciting news," Bertha informed her breathlessly. "It will be in all the papers tomorrow, but I knew you'd want to hear all about it. Jim came home with the news, and oh! it's so thrilling, just like a spy story!"

A cold hand squeezed the breath out of Marcy, and she sagged into a chair. Dear Lord, don't let something else have happened to David, she prayed fervently.

"Wh-what happened?" The question barely whispered past her dry lips.

"It's about David, love. I thought he might have told you, but men can be so infuriatingly modest! Still, I guess the authorities can put the pressure on a person, and they really meant it when making him promise not

to speak to anyone until they were able to rescue the prisoners."

"What prisoners?" Marcy discovered she was able to breathe again. David, it seemed, was safe.

"The envoys, of course. Oh dear, I'm not being very clear, am I? I always thought there was something odd about David's trip to Bolivia. Jim was so closemouthed about it whenever I questioned him, especially when Martha sounded concerned, wondering if he intended to keep that darling apartment."

Marcy had a distinct urge to reach through the miles of line and strangle the rambling woman. "What envoys?" she demanded sharply.

Her impatience evidently got through to Bertha, and she rushed through the story, relating how two special American envoys had been sent to Bolivia to start on sensitive negotiations. As soon as they left the airport to go to their hotel, they'd been kidnapped by guerrillas. David, who'd been in the taxi behind them, tried to stop them but had been overwhelmed and taken also. The ransom they demanded was exorbitant—in the millions. After months of captivity David had escaped, even though shot. Even the news media kept the event secret, giving the authorities time to work on the information David gave them. Apparently it was because of him that the kidnapers were captured and the prisoners released.

There was more, but Marcy's heart was thundering in her ears, preventing her from hearing. She was recalling David's bandaged arm, his weariness, his faded tan and weight loss. Trust him, he'd asked. He would

explain the reason for his absence as soon as he could, he'd promised. But she'd been so tied up in her own misery that she hadn't listened.

Oh, David, what have I done to us? she thought with bitter regret. Somehow Marcy terminated the call and stared bleakly into space. With agonizing clarity she heard David's whispered words hinting at empty black nights as he hungered for her kisses. Why hadn't she listened?

The phone rang again, and through a daze Marcy heard her mother's opening words. "Did Bertha call you, darling? I knew that David must have had a good reason for that long absence, the poor man! How he must have suffered!"

"It seems that David is quite the hero," Marcy managed. Suddenly a surge of hope emerged. Surely now that he was free to discuss it, he'd come home, and she could tell him of her willingness to accept his marriage proposal. Somehow, together they'd unravel the problems concerning their jobs. We'll work it out, he'd promised. Her mother's voice cut through her reverie.

"He . . . David called a little while ago from Texas," she admitted in a strained voice, and an icy finger touched Marcy's spine.

She paused, and Marcy waited as apprehension tightened in her chest until it became difficult to breathe. "He gave me his address and asked if I'd have his belongings packed and sent there. He's giving up the carriage house."

Marcy reached blindly for the nearby chair and sagged into it. "I see." The agonized whisper was

forced from between frozen lips.

"Marcy?" The call came anxiously over the line. "Won't you come home, please? I don't like breaking the news like this. Can't you come and we'll have a cup of tea ... or some wine ... or get properly smashed together."

The incongruous picture of her mother being inebriated cracked the ice barrier forming around her, and she gave a small hysterical laugh. "Thanks, Mom, but I'm all right. After all, it was bound to happen."

How could I have been such a complete fool to let someone so special slip away after what we had shared? she thought.

"I was dreading telling you, dear, especially after the other news Bertha had earlier this morning," her mother admitted sadly.

"What else did she have to say?" Marcy asked guardedly, her body tensing as if to ward off another blow.

"She said that Jim informed her that David is being sent on a new project in China. They're building a huge hydroelectric dam, and it could take as long as five years."

Marcy barely heard the concern in her mother's voice. A numbness descended over her, blocking all reaction. "He'll thrive on the challenge," she said dully. Her mother mercifully hung up shortly thereafter. She couldn't have spoken rationally much longer.

Marcy crawled into bed to stare blindly at the dark ceiling for long hours. Her life stretched before her, a black tunnel that had no ending. The numbness slow-

ly receded, but the release of tears wouldn't come to ease her fever-bright eyes.

She'd really done it this time! She'd been given the ultimate gift of a man's love. But she'd shied away from a commitment because of unbending preconceived notions of what a marriage should be like. Now, when it was too late, she realized all she'd thrown away.

Marcy's whole conception of marriage was suddenly changed. She finally realized a good marriage did not depend on having a stable home. It depended on much, much more. First there was love, a love without which life lost its meaning, a love that didn't need a home to contain it. She'd been so busy placing barriers around herself that David had finally given up. He'd been a man in every sense of the word, while she'd acted like an immature adolescent afraid to be the woman he thought her to be.

As Bertha had pointed out, if they were blessed with children, they'd be able to adapt as long as the children were assured of being part of that love. She could see those children with a startling clarity—a sturdy boy with David's warm dark eyes, with his heart-twisting lopsided grin, and a little girl with gray eyes, eyes like her own and her mother's.

The tears came then, not sobbing tears, but silent ones that slid from the corners of her eyes to fall on the pillow. She would never hold those beautiful children in her arms, never be able to give David that ultimate gift of her love.

The final sweet torture started as her body started remembering how his large firm hand moved with ten-

der messages that became more demanding when he sensed her increasing passion. She remembered how his warm moist mouth covered hers, how his tongue became an implement of erotic pleasure that made her writhe sinuously against his aroused body. She heard echoes of their love sounds filling the air with soft whimpers until that final cry of exaltation erupted when they reached the climaxing pinnacle.

Her body was covered with a sheen of perspiration as her head tossed in restless frustration on the dampened pillow. She knew she'd never again experience the wonder of David's love. How could she ever beg his forgiveness, explain to him that she finally had her values straight, that having his love meant more than life to her?

The revelation had come all too late. David was leaving for China. In five years he wouldn't remember her except as the woman who had never grown up, who had never understood what love and loving was all about.

Exhaustion finally brought sleep but no rest. Her dreams were of David, but a David without warmth. Curtains were drawn over his eyes. The remembered glow she'd basked in so luxuriously had become a blankness that rejected every memory of her. The wonderful lopsided grin was replaced by a thin grim line that denied any possibility of ever again softening over her mouth. And his hands . . . those wonderful, sensitive fingers that could bring her to such exquisite heights of passion were now rock-hard fists that denied any knowledge of her quivering flesh.

She woke up shivering uncontrollably, her cheeks wet from her tears. She stared dully out of the window, afraid to go back to sleep and into the nightmare again. It was almost dawn, and she whimpered from the sharpness of the pain, recalling other gray dawns when she'd lingered until the last minute beside David, absorbing his warmth before having to get up, her sated body reveling in the memories of the rapture they'd shared during the night.

She dragged herself out of bed, hoping to revive herself with a bracing shower. After a look at her haggard face reflected in the bathroom mirror, she resigned herself to spending long minutes using her full array of cosmetics to repair the damage. Take one day at a time, she warned herself. That admonition had carried her through the six months of his previous absence, but would it be enough to help her through the endless days that lay before her?

This time it would be so much more difficult. Before there'd been only one haunting night that she'd shared with David. Now she'd had many more evenings spent in his arms, and her body, having been drunk on the exquisite ecstasy he could bring it to, thirsted for more.

What devastated Marcy with equal force was the loss of the mental stimulation they'd also enjoyed when together. She'd lost all too much because her love hadn't had the maturity to give the trust David had asked for. She had assumed he was playing games, was willfully harboring a life separate from the one they shared in Montclair. Would she ever forget the devas-

tation she felt when she'd heard of the hardships he'd actually suffered during those six months? *Oh, David, forgive me!* She wept.

When Marcy arrived at work, a new shipment of dresses awaited her inspection. They were a colorful assortment of summerwear that Debra had bought from a prominent house in California. If she got the promotion, her trips would be further afield than ever before. Suddenly she longed for the challenge, knowing the demands and the distractions of the new job could be her salvation.

Marcy discussed the display for the beachwear with some of her sales personnel and then went to the wrapping counter to check on a complaint that the new shipment of dress boxes had inadequate perforation slits to anchor the corners.

She bought a morning newspaper, hoping to find some word of David and the kidnapped envoys. Near the front of the paper there was a picture of the newly released prisoners shaking hands with David. Her eyes focused on him hungrily and saw the deep lines in his cheeks, the shadows under his eyes. He'd looked weary when he'd returned from Bolivia, but now he looked nearly exhausted.

The paper trembled in her hands, and she put it aside. Her face hadn't looked much better that morning before she'd carefully layered on the camouflaging makeup. Hadn't Bertha reported her husband's observation about David's short temper? She recalled how her salesclerks had managed to skitter away from her before she'd gotten a handle on her own short-fused

one. Could they both be suffering from the same syndrome—the same frustration resulting from a love gone awry? she suddenly wondered. A bright shaft of hope touched her, and she wished she could get away by herself to think further on that revealing possibility.

“There you are!” Debra smiled a greeting as she stopped before the counter. “I’ve been looking for you to join me in a coffee break. I didn’t have time to get breakfast, and from the way you look, you haven’t either.”

So much for the hiding power of makeup, Marcy thought, joining her slim, smartly dressed boss. “It was one of those mornings,” she admitted, realizing that was the understatement of the year.

Debra glanced over her critically as they selected a sweet bun to go with the coffee. “You look like you’ve gone down a dress size, and that can be expensive on the wardrobe. After all, as head buyer, you’ll have to dress the part!”

It took Marcy a minute to understand what she was saying, and Debra laughed on seeing the mixed emotions that sped across her face. “I shouldn’t tell you this in advance, but I’ve just left Mr. Danielson. You can expect to see him after lunch. I hope you’ll be able to act properly surprised and grateful! I always like to be prepared when confronted with something that requires a major decision, so I thought I’d extend the courtesy to you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the warning,” Marcy admitted gratefully. This was the goal she’d been working toward before she ever knew David, and now it could

prove to be the means to erase him from her mind.

"I'm busy this evening, so we'll have to put off a private celebration until later," Debra said with a smile. "You'll be working off several more pounds while I show you the ropes. I'm warning you, it will be hard work with plenty of headaches, but it has its compensations."

She buttered a section of her bun with thoughtful concentration before continuing. "Your social life can suffer. The hours are frequently erratic, and you have to attend all sorts of selling conventions and showings to keep on top of each market. I hope you have a considerate boyfriend. My husband couldn't take it, and when I started making more than he did, I saw the handwriting on the wall."

Since Glen was the only one she was dating at the moment, she wondered abstractly if he could take it. Being a salesman in the business, he understood the hazards inherent in the buying game. If only she'd been prepared to understand the hazards inherent in David's profession, she thought regretfully.

Mr. Danielson's call came in the late afternoon. By that time Marcy had decided that Debra had been completely mistaken. She'd buried herself in the back of the stock room in an effort to avoid more arguments with other employees. She grinned ruefully as she remembered that David also had been accused of having a short temper. What a thing to share, she told herself inimically.

Mr. Danielson was a benevolent dictator whom his employees respected and were somewhat in awe of.

He'd taken a small business and built it into a large, prestigious department store. While many companies were floundering, his profits increased at a satisfying rate because he offered the very best merchandise at the lowest possible prices.

With his white hair and gentle features, he seemed a very grandfatherly figure . . . until one encountered the piercing, sharp blue eyes that warned that they never missed anything.

He arose formally from behind his handsome antique leather-topped desk. "Please be seated, Miss Brown," he invited, waving a hand at a wing-back chair. "I had hoped to have this meeting before now, but there was some pressing business I had to attend to first."

A file was centered on the desk before him, and he tapped it gently with one finger. Marcy saw her name typed neatly on the cover. "As you know, Debra Simons is leaving us for greener fields. While we shall miss her, I can't fault her desire to accept a more competitive position with a larger conglomerate. We must all strive upward or stagnate."

He fixed his pale blue eyes on hers, and Marcy hoped her nervousness wasn't showing. Debra had been a cool, knowledgeable person, completely unflappable in every situation, and she knew that was what Mr. Danielson demanded in his top executives. She forced her clenched hands to slowly relax.

"This store's habit is to promote up through the ranks if at all possible. Since being informed of Mrs. Simons's move, I've been examining the records of each

person who might qualify to take over her position."

The whole store knew about that, Marcy thought wryly. Each department had in turn gone into shock when spying the white-haired man prowling in their section.

"The person who gets this position must be one who can accept responsibility, who can work closely with me and understand what we represent." His gaze flickered down to her file before again settling on her. "I had just about made up my mind, but the board, of course, has something to say about who is eventually chosen. The name of an outsider who has an exceptional record has been submitted. He's moved into the area and would like to transfer here." He paused, his face an unreadable mask.

Debra hadn't told her about this. Perhaps she'd only been told that Marcy had won out over the other probabilities being considered from the ranks of the workers. She straightened imperceptibly in the chair as she tried to brace herself for the final announcement. Was this new applicant the reason why she hadn't been called until almost closing time?

The tension built in her, and she realized with resentment that he was enjoying keeping her dangling. Was it to make her properly appreciative if she got the job? Debra had coped, and so could she. No job was perfect, and at present the hidden plus for this position was the concentrated work she'd be forced to put in, which should keep her unhappy, unresolved love affair in the background.

Unresolved. The word caught her attention as small

alarm bells rang deep within her. If only she had time to think further on that, she thought with a sense of urgency as she reluctantly dragged her wandering attention back to Mr. Danielson.

He was beaming, and she realized guiltily she'd missed part of what he'd been saying. "... and they agreed with me. You're to report to Mrs. Simons on Monday so that you can work together toward a smooth transition. She no doubt has already warned you that I run a tight ship and don't tolerate loose ends."

Loose ends. The phrase was like a knife cutting through the bindings that had been growing more restrictive ever since David's last fateful telephone call saying he'd stopped wanting her.

Or had he? With startling clarity her mind replayed their last conversation. He'd sounded so exhausted because of his push to return to her as promised. "*I've offered my love and can't give any more,*" he'd said. "*The next step is up to you.*"

As usual, she'd been so wrapped up in her own version of their problem, she hadn't really listened to what he'd been saying. She hadn't thought of attempting any reconciliation, partly from pride and partly because she'd been so used to having him be the pursuer. *The next step is up to you.* The words blazed with new meaning.

Marcy stood up to accept Mr. Danielson's outstretched hand as he congratulated her, and she forced herself to restrain the urgency to race from the room. Her face was glowing, and he smiled with satisfaction

over her apparent pleasure over being given the job.

But Marcy could barely contain the flooding hope as she listened with minimal attention to his final words of advice.

David, please don't be off to China yet!

"May I have the rest of the week off?" she asked breathlessly. "There are several of my own loose ends that I must clear up."

He smiled at her repeat of his words. "I can understand," he agreed benignly. "When you return, you'll then be able to give your new position your full attention."

But Marcy never heard him. Her mind was clicking with what had to be done. *Don't let me be too late!* she prayed fervently as she drove to her apartment, fighting off the doubts that started to intrude. She had several very important telephone calls to make. So much depended on her correct evaluation of David's final words. This time, she hoped, she was listening and was interpreting correctly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Marcy ran her hand wearily through her hair. Her trip was nearing the end, and her conflicting thoughts returned with renewed force.

What if . . . But she'd already gone through all the "what ifs" and "if onlys." The questions would be asked, the answers given, in a few short hours. After the turmoil she'd lived through for what seemed like ages, she could manage until reaching the town with the improbable name of Ellie's Britches.

The man at the car rental place in Pecos had informed her with a twinkle in his eyes that now that the construction crew had moved into the near ghost town, it no doubt again lived up to the stories of its short but lurid past.

It was difficult to realize that less than twenty-four hours ago she'd been offered the job she'd worked so hard for, and all she could think of was if she'd have trouble making connections to Texas.

On reaching home, her first call had been to her mother. David, in requesting his belongings be shipped to Texas, had given his address, something he'd not of-

ferred to her, which had been part of her hurt. In hurried, slightly disjointed sentences, she'd explained what she intended to do. Bolstered by her mother's understanding and encouragement, she'd then called the Newark airport and had managed to book a flight to Dallas that evening.

Connections to Pecos on a smaller line had to wait until the next morning, and the night in the motel had been long and filled with anxiety.

It was well over two months since she'd seen David. What if that separation was too long and his attention had been taken by someone else?

She hadn't been the first to succumb to his charms. His expertise had made that evident. But she had been the first woman he had ever wanted to marry. She was certain no other woman would have turned him down. His pride and his ego must have been wounded, but he'd have little trouble finding someone eager to soothe and console him. The thought sent a chill through her. Her only hope was that she'd come to her senses in time.

She followed Highway 285 and slowed slightly after passing the turnoff to Mentone. The helpful man at the car rental had stated that he didn't know if there was a sign posted, but it wouldn't be too much farther before she'd see the newly graveled road that would lead to her destination.

She found the turnoff and spent an uncomfortable half hour sandwiched between two huge, lumbering trucks as they labored over several switchbacks while climbing through a mountain pass. The dust settled in

an obliterating layer over her car, seeping through the closed windows until she felt she'd never be free of the gritty particles.

The road made a sharp turn, and the small village lay before her. It might have once been a slumbering ghost town, but even from the distance she could feel its new, raw vibrancy as if it were too busy to even pause to sleep. Everywhere there were stacked piles of materials—pipes in every conceivable size, cement blocks, and hastily constructed warehouses. The small block houses were utilitarian at best, and she spied a huge Quonset hut with a sign proclaiming it to be the mess hall. Covering everything in a uniform blanket was the all-enveloping dust.

She inched her way down the rutted main street, bewildered and appalled. How was she to find David in this sprawling community? Innocent of what a construction town was like, she'd thought no further than of getting there, assuming that they'd automatically find each other.

A jeep came barreling out of a driveway, pulling her gaze in its direction. She gave a sigh of relief. Under the dust she read Johnson-Blake Construction and recognized it as the company that David worked for.

She found a parking place among the half-trucks and jeeps which seemed to be the popular mode of transportation and hurried into the office. She watched with fascination as a middle-aged woman talked calmly over the phone while reaching behind her for a set of rolled-up blueprints that she handed to a khaki-clad man.

"May I help you?" the woman asked with a friendly smile when finished.

"I'm trying to locate David Swenson," Marcy informed her.

The smile disappeared to be replaced with a cool dismissal. "I'm afraid you're wasting your time. Mr. Swenson has given strict orders that he's not to be bothered by the press."

Marcy suppressed her smile. She could imagine David issuing those orders. "I'm not a reporter. I'm . . ." She paused. What was she? . . . a friend? . . . a lover? . . . a prospective wife? "My name is Marcy Brown."

The smile returned, turning into a wide grin. "Am I glad to meet you! I tried my best, but David was impossible when I couldn't patch his calls through to you any clearer."

The phone buzzed noisily on her desk, and she looked at it with annoyance. "Look," she said hurriedly, searching through a small box on the filing cabinet. "David is still at the site and won't be back for another hour or so. Why don't you go to his place and wait for him there? Follow this road for about a mile, and you'll see a group of houses. The VIPs get to live away from this dust. Here's a duplicate key. His name is on the mailbox out front, so you can't miss his place."

She picked up the still ringing phone and waved Marcy on as she offered her thanks. Marcy hurried to the car, her heart racing madly. She'd be seeing David in an hour or two, and she had a lot to do, the highest priority being to shower and wash the grit from her hair. Remembering how he loved to filter the strands

of her hair through his fingers, remarking on its silky texture, she intended he'd have that same pleasure again—if all went as she hoped.

Once she arrived at David's house and cleaned up, she brushed her hair until it seemed to shine with an inner light. She didn't know what had guided her to pack her sultry, red knit jump suit, but it did wonderful things for her figure. David's discerning eyes wouldn't miss that it was her only covering.

She paced the small bungalow, willing the time to pass. The living room was comfortable and the kitchen adequate, but after a quick glance in the refrigerator, she guessed that David did his eating in the mess hall. There was only one bedroom, and after much indecision she hung her clothes in the back of the closet. What if she'd misread David's words? What if he'd been simply caught up in the excitement of the chase and his proposal held no substance?

The "what ifs" threatened her again, and she pushed them away. It was too late to think along that line. She reached for his bottle of Scotch sitting on the dividing counter and poured herself a drink.

The living room had a deep bay window with a clear view of the road. It had an inviting wide cushioned window seat, and she curled into it and sipped the mellow liquor reflectively. The sun slowly disappeared behind the western mountain, and she watched the dusk deepening in the little valley.

The warmth spread through her, warning her that she hadn't eaten since the morning flight to Pecos. Remembering seeing some cheese in the refrigerator, she

thought it might be wise to eat a little, but her head felt too comfortable resting against the cushion. . . .

Marcy woke with a start, blinking at the light streaming from the open kitchens. Momentarily dazed, she watched in silence as David reached for a glass from the cabinet and poured a healthy portion from the bottle on the counter. He drained it partially and shuddered slightly when the fire touched him internally. Topping the rest with water from the faucet, he carried it into his bedroom.

Marcy shook her head in disbelief. While flung halfway across the continent, she'd pictured every possible meeting from hungry kisses to cold rejection. To be totally ignored had never entered her mind. Only then did she realize that the circle of light in the room didn't reach her little retreat in the window bay, and she was effectively hidden in camouflaging shadows.

What should she do now? Hearing the shower, she settled back to wait his return. Her eyes clouded, recalling his haggard features, his exhaustion even more pronounced than what she'd seen in the news photo. *Oh, David, what have we done to each other?* she thought.

David returned within ten minutes, wearing the short navy terry robe she'd seen hanging on the bathroom door. Marcy stared at him hungrily, reveling in the wide sweep of his shoulders, the exposed muscular length of his legs. Her senses sang with memories of his hair-roughened thigh pressing between her legs, preparing for his full possession.

Marcy watched as he refreshed his glass from the

bottle, then stopped suddenly to peer into the shrouded living room as if sensing her scrutiny. Moving swiftly, he snapped on the overhead light. Marcy heard his swift exhalation of air. Seeing his ashen face, she met his incredulous stare bravely and rose slowly.

"Hello, David," she murmured softly. "Do you want to freshen my drink also?"

He ignored her offered glass as his gaze hardened.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he grated out.

She faltered momentarily under the force of his rejection before a rebellion surged to rescue her. Damn it, she hadn't come this far only to retreat at the first shot without a fight. "You said the next move was up to me," she reminded him. "Since it became apparent you had no intention of returning to New Jersey, I had to come to Texas."

The overhead light laid harsh planes on his rugged features. "What does that mean? That you miss our nights in bed and want a few more samplings before you return to your new job?"

He ignored the hurt that darkened her gray eyes, maybe it was because of it that he felt the need to lash out. Dammit, she was going to feel some of the pain that never stopped clawing at his innards ever since she'd rejected him! "Your mother was very proud telling me of your promotion. I remember your telling me how you'd be doing more traveling if you got it. We certainly were lucky not to have married. We'd have had to make appointments to see each other."

He wasn't about to drown in those gray dark pools, or wind his fingers through the silken hair that haloed

her head! He'd be crazy to taste the wonder beyond those soft lips, to glory in the way those breasts outlined by that damned outfit could fill his hands!

He wiped his damp palms on the terry that covered his thighs as it hit him with sledgehammer force that she wore as little as he did under her outer covering.

What was it about this woman that invaded his every thought, that turned his nights into a nightmare of desire? He heard his breath rasp deep in his chest as his hands closed over her shoulders before sliding down her back. Then she was in his arms, and he knew he could never let her go again. His mouth fitted over the soft fullness of her lips, and he was whole again.

Marcy reeled under the onslaught of his words—they were so close to what she'd once believed he thought. Somehow she had to convince him it didn't have to be like that.

Then the hardness blanketing his eyes faded, and she saw the familiar warmth. Her breath caught in her throat as his hands cupped her shoulders and moved with urgent strokes down her spine. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, and she felt the spasm that gripped him before his mouth covered hers. A sigh rose from her soul to mingle with the one escaping from him. She'd wandered alone for too long a time. She was home at last.

The kiss became a hungry exploration. Their hands moved in urgent forays, touching, gliding, kneading. Their bodies met, fusing every soft curve to each firm

plane, offering themselves to the fiery heat being generated, willing sacrifices to the passion consuming them.

Had it only been a few months? Each minute of aching longing had to be eradicated before they could move on to the present. David finally tore his mouth from hers, and he swept her up in his arms. The light from the living room touched the bed with a warm glow, but all Marcy was aware of was the desire burning in David's eyes, consuming her in flames. She met his gaze gladly, letting him see she was lit with an equal passion.

"Marcy!" Her name erupted in a deep groan, filled with longing. Coherent thought then ended. Feverish hands tore at clothes that dared to hide them from each other.

They were on the bed, eagerly exploring each other's bodies. Hands moved hotly, demanding, searching for areas not yet explored until Marcy was writhing, arching, seducing with every instinctive feminine wile.

They could wait no longer. David moved into her, and together they became the taker, the giver . . . the leader, the follower . . . the lovers.

Exhaustion finally took them into sleep, their moist bodies still partially entwined. Marcy had no idea what time it was when she woke up. She turned her head to explore the features of the man she loved so ardently. His face was inches from hers, and with the help of the living room light, she could see the lines of weariness had been replaced with a relaxed con-

tentment. It was always so after they made love, and the fact that she could do this for him gave its own contentment to her.

How she loved this man! How could she have thought she could exist without him? He was as necessary as breathing to her well-being. She closed the intervening inches to feather a kiss on his firm yet sensuous lips.

"Is that the best you can do?" David murmured, his lips slitting open to laugh at her.

"Is this better?" she responded, pressing kisses on the corner of his mouth before nibbling on his lower lip.

"A trifle," he conceded.

Marcy wasn't one to turn down a challenge, especially one like this. She pushed him on his back and leaned over him, her hair falling in a curtain enclosing them in silken privacy. Her mouth parted to fit over his, duplicating his expertise. Her tongue teased in little darts until he relaxed so she could savor the soft inner lining of his lips. When satisfied, she moved on to further conquests and deepened her kiss until he gave her entree for plundering exploration.

Meanwhile, her hand moved over his male breast, finding the small nub, and her fingers performed the same rites upon it he did so exquisitely on hers. The groan in his throat told of his response, adding to the pleasure of her seduction.

Challenge her, would he? She'd show him she'd learned her lessons well, she vowed gleefully. Her silken thigh moved between his muscular ones, to rub

sinuously along their length. She thrilled to his response, gloating as his hands clutched at the sheets under them, and his chest moved in deepening breaths.

He tore his mouth from hers and cupped her face to gaze at her, his eyes deep pools burning with desire that invited her to join him in the promise held in their dark depths. She drowned in them happily, a willing victim.

"Ah, Marcy, my sweet wanton witch," he breathed before taking her mouth. He rose then, turning her on her back, and they paid sweet adoration to each other in a prolonged, sensuous exchange until they could no longer control themselves, and they gave themselves over to the ecstasy that was theirs and theirs alone.

Their first mating had been explosive, a fierce protest against the long separation. This one was the seal on a promise for the future.

Or was it? Marcy stirred in David's arms. There were still questions that needed to be resolved.

"David?" she started tentatively. "We really should talk."

His kiss brushed the corner of her mouth while his hand curled possessively over her breast. He eyed her sleepily with supreme masculine contentment. "I thought we said it all."

Had they? She guessed in a way they had, but she needed verbal answers. "I found out what happened," Marcy started hesitantly. "Oh, David, can you ever forgive me for doubting you?"

"Hush, love," he soothed. "I was forced into promising not to talk about it. I hated not being able

to explain everything to you, but several men's lives depended upon my silence. I had planned to call when you had returned from your convention, but it was my misfortune to be on the same plane as those envoys. I never made it to my hotel.

"It's behind us now, sweet love. Someday I'll tell you the full story. But not now."

"Are you really going to China?" she asked, half fearfully. Would he leave her again now that they were back together?

His fingers stilled their glide. "If I were, would you come with me?"

The warmth that had enfolded them dropped, and Marcy felt as if she was in a draft. Would she? She'd traveled this far in her need to right the situation that had separated them. Could she give up everything to live with him halfway around the world?

She had come to the end of her tunnel, experienced the magic of his arms once more. Could she deliberately plunge into another dark tunnel, knowing this time there'd be no hope that he'd be there to rescue her?

"What do wives do at these construction sites?" she hedged.

He rolled on his back, leaving Marcy feeling shatteringly isolated. "Bill's wife, Dorothy, is the best secretary we've ever had. I heard John's wife is managing a book store in Pecos and is already hiring three others to help her. They do what their ambition leads them to do. I can't guarantee that there'll be a position for a fashion buyer wherever I'm sent, if that's what you're

asking. Most follow their husbands because they both realize that is the only way they could exist."

Marcy heard the bitterness creep into his words as he seemed to retreat further and further away. "I'm just asking," she said gently. His last sentence said it all. She'd tried to exist without him and found she couldn't.

"I've been thinking it over, and I have an idea. If I'd taken the advancement, I would have been involved in more than fashions. With my contacts, I know I can find eager buyers for any worthwhile cottage industry I might find wherever you may be."

Natalie had said that she wished she had someone searching just for her so that her department would be known for its select merchandise. There must be stores in other cities eager for similar discoveries.

"There are always markets for native weavers and knitters, the carvers and pottery-makers. I know it won't be easy, but, David, it would be a whole new field to explore!" she explained earnestly, already pondering the logistics involved.

It was all clear now. Yes, she'd enjoyed her original job and would miss it, but she would not regret giving up the advancement. She wasn't that driven by her career. It had appealed to her only because she'd hoped the added work would help blank out the awful empty existence that life without David had become.

He sat beside her, his hands cupping her face as he stared fiercely into her eyes. "Then you will marry me?"

She saw the vulnerability shadowing his eyes and the return of the tense lines bracketing his mouth. Her

finger moved soothingly over the creases, willing them erased. "Of course, David," she murmured gently. "Why do you think I came?"

"Martha," he persisted. He had to know the full extent of her capitulation before he told her. "Will you be having second thoughts about leaving her?"

"Didn't you know that a friend is staying with her, that I have my own apartment now?" He didn't look surprised, so she assumed her mother had informed him when he'd last called. Someday she'd also tell the full story, but not now when he needed reassurance.

"And what if we have children?" he continued doggedly, knowing it had been one of the main things precipitating their separation, and he regarded her intently.

"I hope we do," she said bravely. "I'll tutor them as long as I can." If Bertha had been able to do it so could she. "Later, we can investigate the excellent private schools around Montclair."

A smile softened the harsh lines. "It won't be necessary, love, at least, not often. I told them in New York that I've put in my time out in the field and that I was getting tired of living out of a suitcase. They promised that China would be my last long job. . . ."

"As long as I'm with you, I can take anything," Marcy said confidently. "When do you have to go?"

His lips brushed the silken curve of her neck. "You didn't let me finish, sweet love. I was missing you so much I thought I'd go out of my mind. But I had those long endless nights to think about you . . . me . . . us, and I got a whole new perspective on what I was de-

manding of you.”

He buried his face in the cloud of pale gold hair cascading over the pillow and inhaled its sweetness for an intoxicating moment. “I knew how you loved your mother and how concerned you were over her health, yet I was asking you to deny it and come with me. I knew the satisfaction you got from your work, yet I thought nothing of expecting you to give it up and follow me.”

He paused, shaking his head at his folly. “I told them China was out, that I’d found the woman who was the breath of my life.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief as she tried to absorb what he was saying. All that agonizing over being separated, and now this! Her confused thoughts were further fragmented as he nibbled along her jawline, his breath fanning over her cheek in a warm caress.

“My job . . . you mean I don’t have to give it up?” she gasped in surprise.

“I would never ask you to do that,” he vowed, unwittingly repeating the answer she’d once given to him. “Do you think you can get time off for a honeymoon before you take the new position?”

She quivered, hearing his wistful uncertainty. She loved him beyond reason and hastened to reassure him. “By the time I landed in Dallas, I had all my priorities straightened out. I realized that even if you were already gone, I couldn’t be happy working under all the pressure the new job would create. I realized my free time is very important to me, and now I have it to devote to you.”

His kiss was a soft savoring, and when he raised his head, she had one last question. "If they had made you go, would you have left without letting me know?" She couldn't hide the hurt the thought produced.

His large hand moved over her shoulder, kneading gently in reassurance. "Originally I kept saying I would, but I knew I had to try one last time. It was killing me to think of being without you for even a year, and I tried to convince myself that with what we'd shared, you'd be willing to wait."

His lopsided grin grew, warming her. "I'm finished here as of this week, and I intended to see you this weekend and seduce you until you surrendered and promised to do just that." His voice grew husky. "I never dreamed that instead I'd have you here in my arms, willing to marry and come with me."

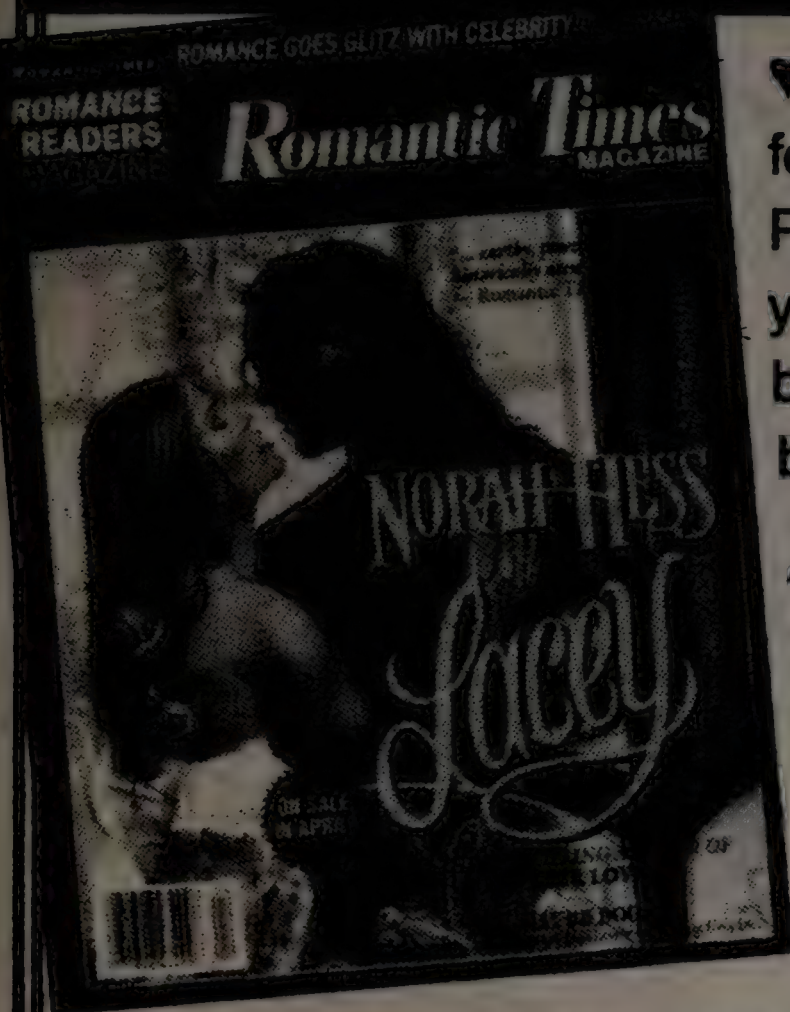
Moisture glistened in his eyes, and his arms moved convulsively around her. "Marcy, sweet love, if you only know what your coming means to me!"

She'd never seen him this vulnerable, and her love flowed to enfold him as did her arms. "I guess you're right. We've said it all," she breathed against his lips. The time for talking was over. They'd have a lifetime for doing it. Now was the time to show her love.

His mouth fitted sublimely over hers as he lowered her to the pillow, and they both demonstrated their love in infinite variety.

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About the Author

Edith Delatush sold her first book on the very day her first granddaughter was born. Since then, she has written more than 20 other romances. She lives in Washington State.

When Midnight Comes

Edith Delatush



After long lonely months, Marcy was finally beginning to forget—forget the pain, the shock, even David's touch. Yet suddenly, there he was again, back with no excuse, no explanation, nothing but the same searing kisses and exquisite embraces that left her reeling. But this time Marcy was not going to be with him, in his arms, in his bed. She had a life of her own, a career that she loved, responsibilities. But not only was David back in her life, he was right on her doorstep, in the guest house he rented from Marcy's mother. David said he loved her, but could she trust his feelings, when she couldn't even trust her own. . .and still didn't know how or why he had disappeared.

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